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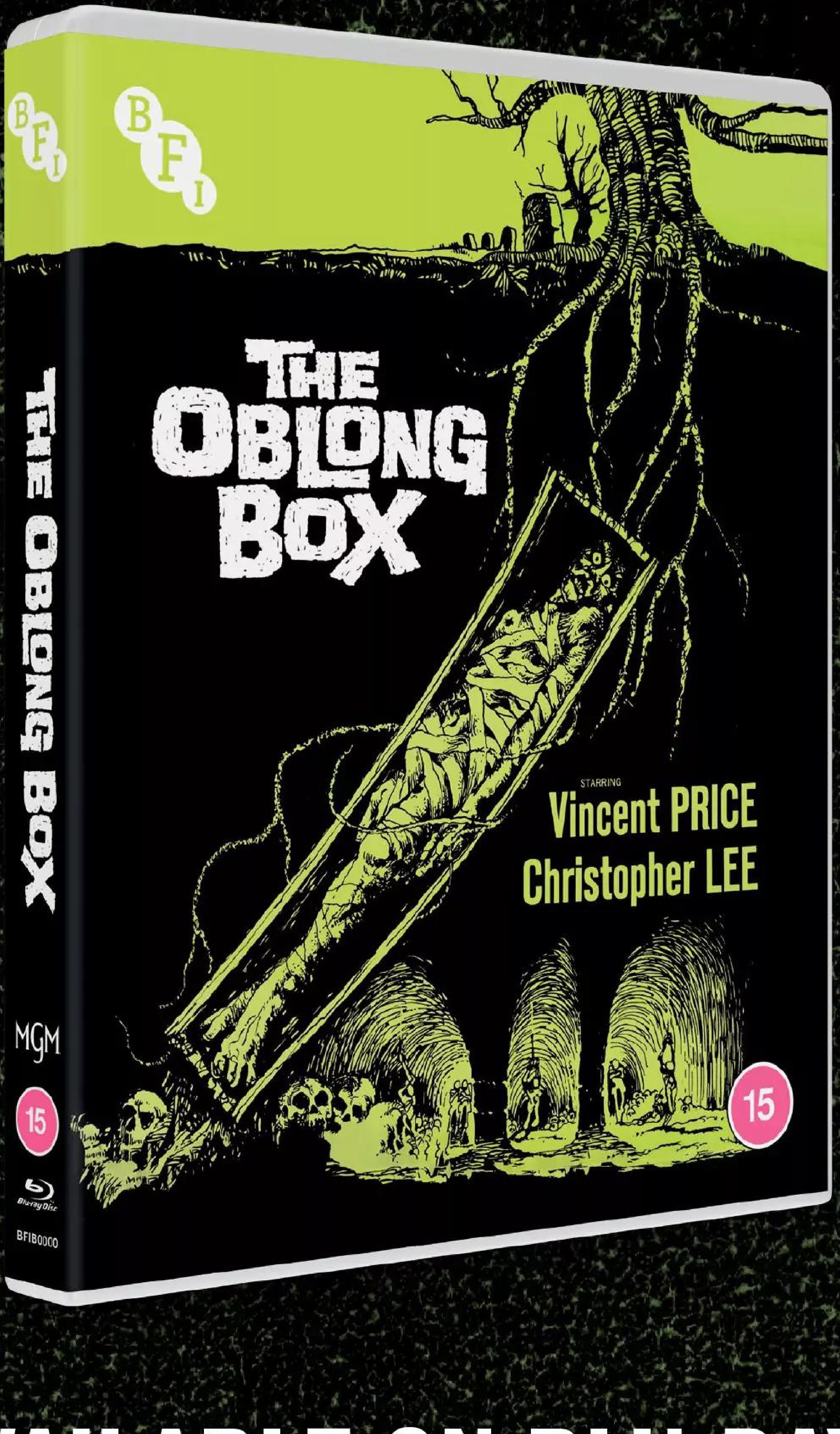

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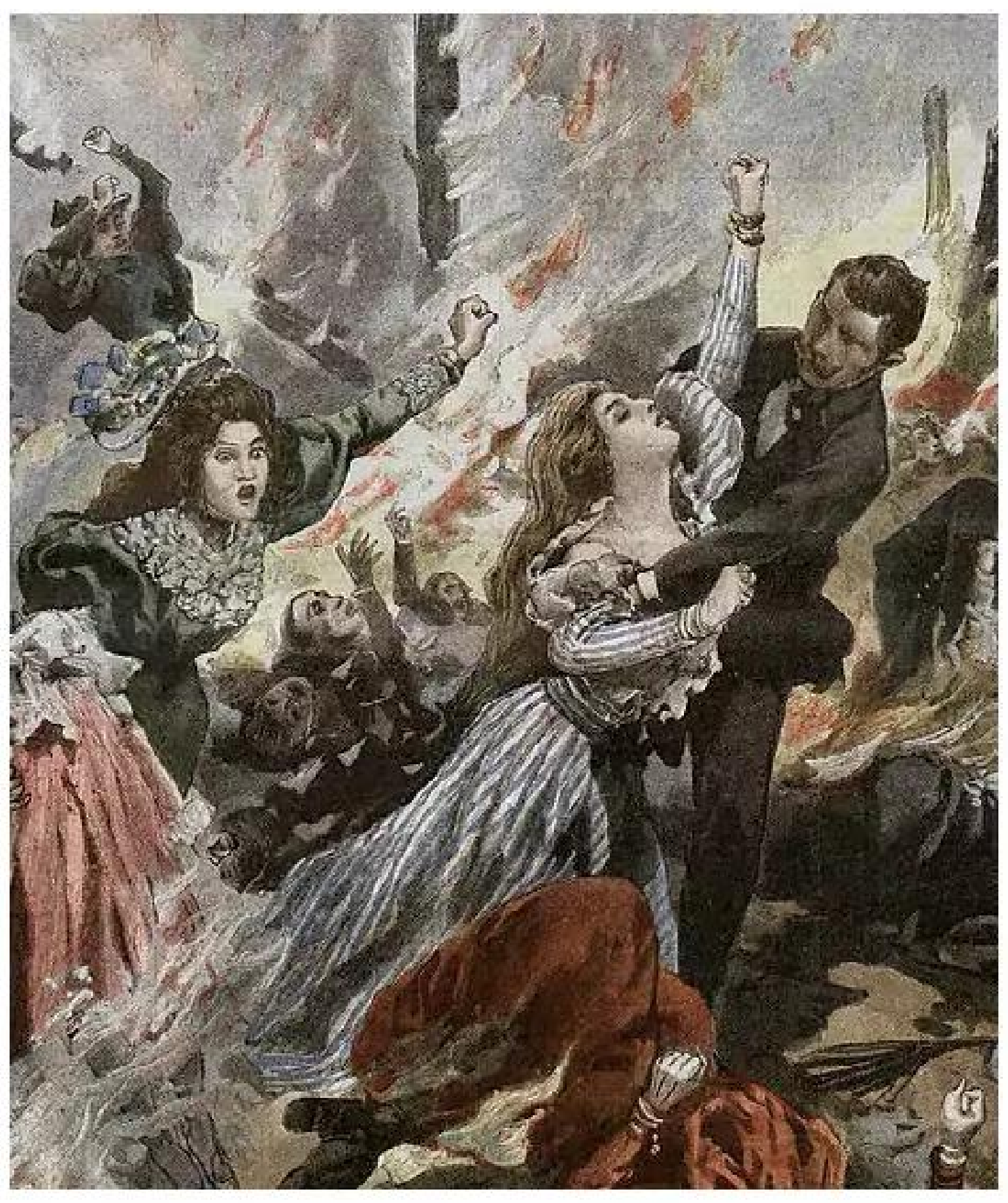
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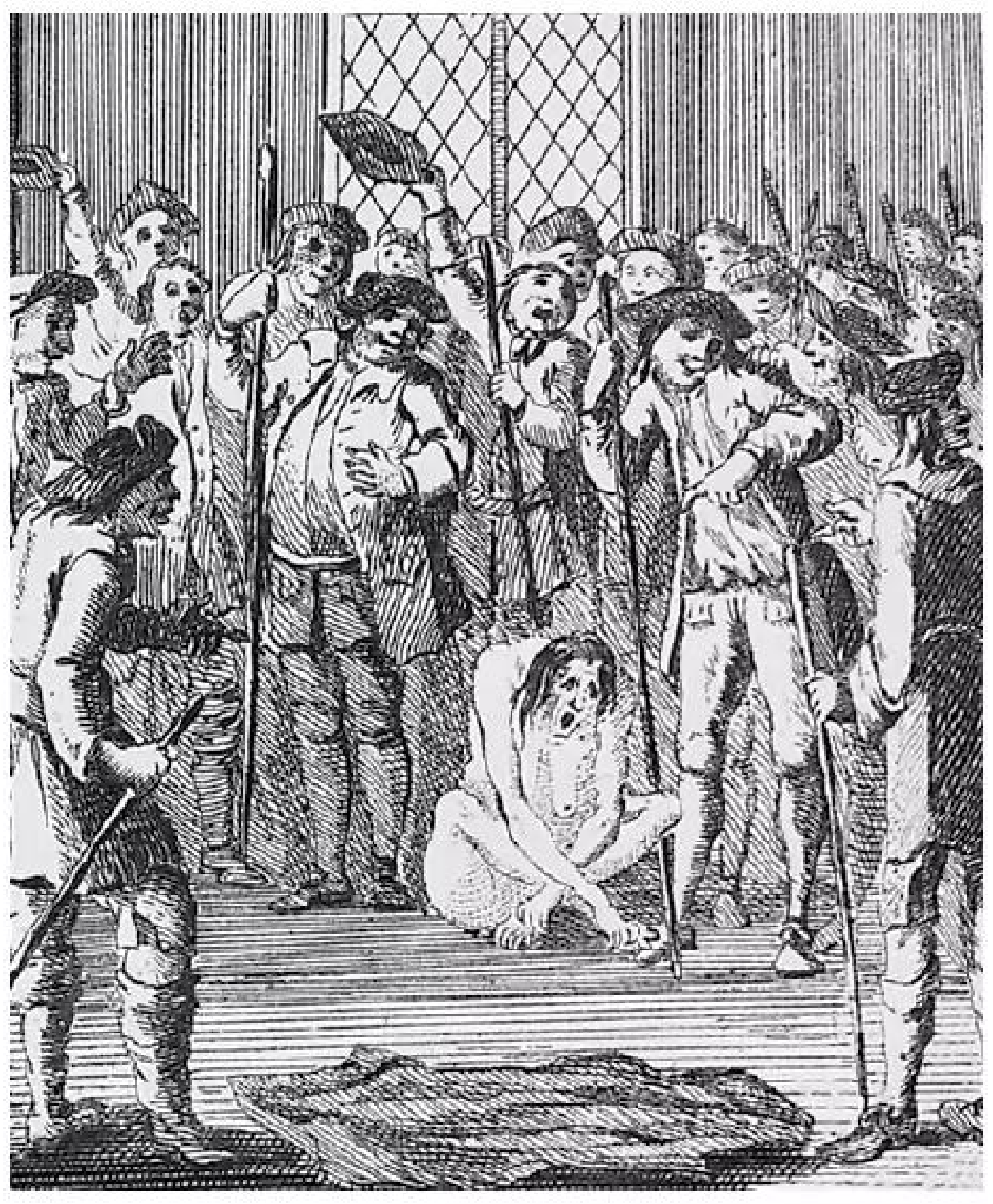
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Everything you always wanted to know about *Fortean Times* but were too paranoid to ask!

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After two of his friends independently reported weird temporal anomalies in Liverpool, **ROB GANDY** decided to investigate. But these were not isolated cases, says **DR ANN WINSPER** as she shares her files on this apparent hotspot for time slip experiences….

38 OPENING THE BOX OF DELIGHTS

In 1984, the BBC's adaptation of John Masefield's *The Box of Delights* became a highlight of the Christmas TV schedules. As the fantasy classic turns 40, **LISA GLEDHILL** meets the viewers who remain captured by its magic, while **BOB FISCHER** unwraps a very special Christmas box – a new feature-length documentary on the making of the series.

46 THE CRINOLINE INFERNO

The most voguish dresses of the mid-19th century were not only absurdly voluminous but also highly flammable – and ultimately responsible for the fiery deaths of thousands of women. **IAN SIMMONS** tells the tragic stories of these literal fashion victims.

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TIME SLIPS
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HEXHAM HEADS

COVER
ETIENNE GILFILLAN

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EDITORIAL

CAPUCINE DESLOUIS

BBC

A BOX OF CHRISTMAS DELIGHTS

Welcome to our special Christmas edition of *Fortean Times*, a feast of festive weirdness to help you make it through to the end of the year. Our cover story examines the growing number of time slip reports emanating from just one street in Liverpool. Bold Street, in recent years, seems to have become the time slip capital of the world, featuring on Danny Robins's *Uncanny* podcast and generating lots of online discussion. Here, Rob Gandy unveils two new accounts, while Dr Ann Winsper shares cases from her Bold Street files and offers an overview of this most intriguing of fortean phenomena. We also mark the 40th anniversary of a fortean TV favourite, the BBC's 1984 adaptation of John Masefield's magical fantasy *The Box of Delights*. Lisa Gledhill meets the fans who have kept the programme's memory burning bright, while Bob Fischer talks to the director of a new documentary about the programme and hears some splendiferous behind-the-scenes stories of its making. Elsewhere, we light up the dark nights with blazing ballerinas, greet the rediscovery of the legendary *Nationwide* report on the Hexham Heads and, as the Archbishop of Canterbury resigns over a safeguarding scandal, share news stories of priests behaving very badly indeed. Merry Christmas!

GOLF BALL MYSTERY SOLVED?

If you read our previous issue you may recall Andy Owens's Forum piece on 'The Great Golf Ball Mystery', in which people in Britain and the US report the sudden appearance of a large number of golf balls in their streets, gardens and parking lots. While putting this issue together, we noticed that one of our Sidelines stories ('Birdie', p9) might point to a possible solution to the mystery. Golfers at this year's Australia's Outback Queensland Masters tournament reported that crows were repeatedly stealing players' golf balls and making off with them. An official said: "We don't know where they take them, but there's sure to be a lot of them somewhere."

FORTEAN BOOKS UP FOR GRABS

Our co-founding editor Paul Sieveking is offering more than 100 books of fortean interest for sale, including classics and rarities. If interested, email Paul at sieveking@forteantimes.com for a full list. The buyer or buyers would need to pick up from a London address.

Also, thanks to the generosity of Amberley Publishing, we are giving away five sets of fortean books by FT regulars in this month's competition – see opposite for details.

ERRATA

FT448:22: A bout of geographical confusion affected our report on the latest outbreak of 'Monolithomania' in the US. A new monolith had appeared in the city of Des Moines, which as numerous readers, including Andy Asp of California and Geoffrey Summrall of Mississippi, pointed out, is not in Indiana (as the report stated) but Iowa, of which Des Moines is the State Capital. To compound the confusion, we mentioned a mural commemorating the "nearby" Maury Island UFO incident, which, as Morgan Girling pointed out in an email, took place close to the completely different city of Des Moines, Washington – where the Maury Island mural indeed resides and where the mystery monolith in fact appeared in 2021, 2022 and 2024. As Andy noted: "Not many islands in Iowa, or in Indiana for that matter."

COMPETITION

A SELECTION OF FORTEAN BOOKS FROM AMBERLEY PUBLISHING

FIVE LUCKY WINNERS WILL EACH RECEIVE A SET OF THREE FORTEAN BOOKS

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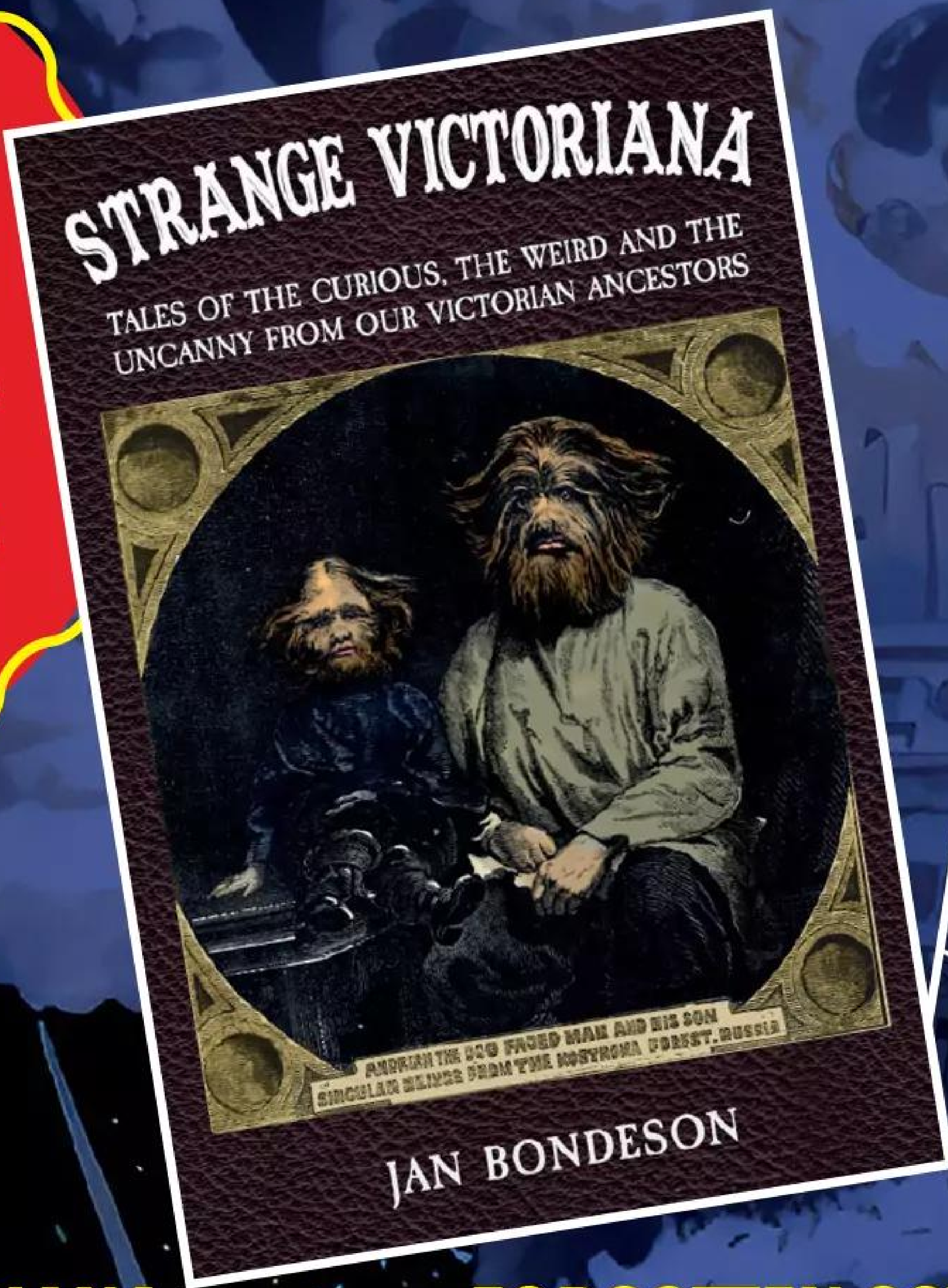
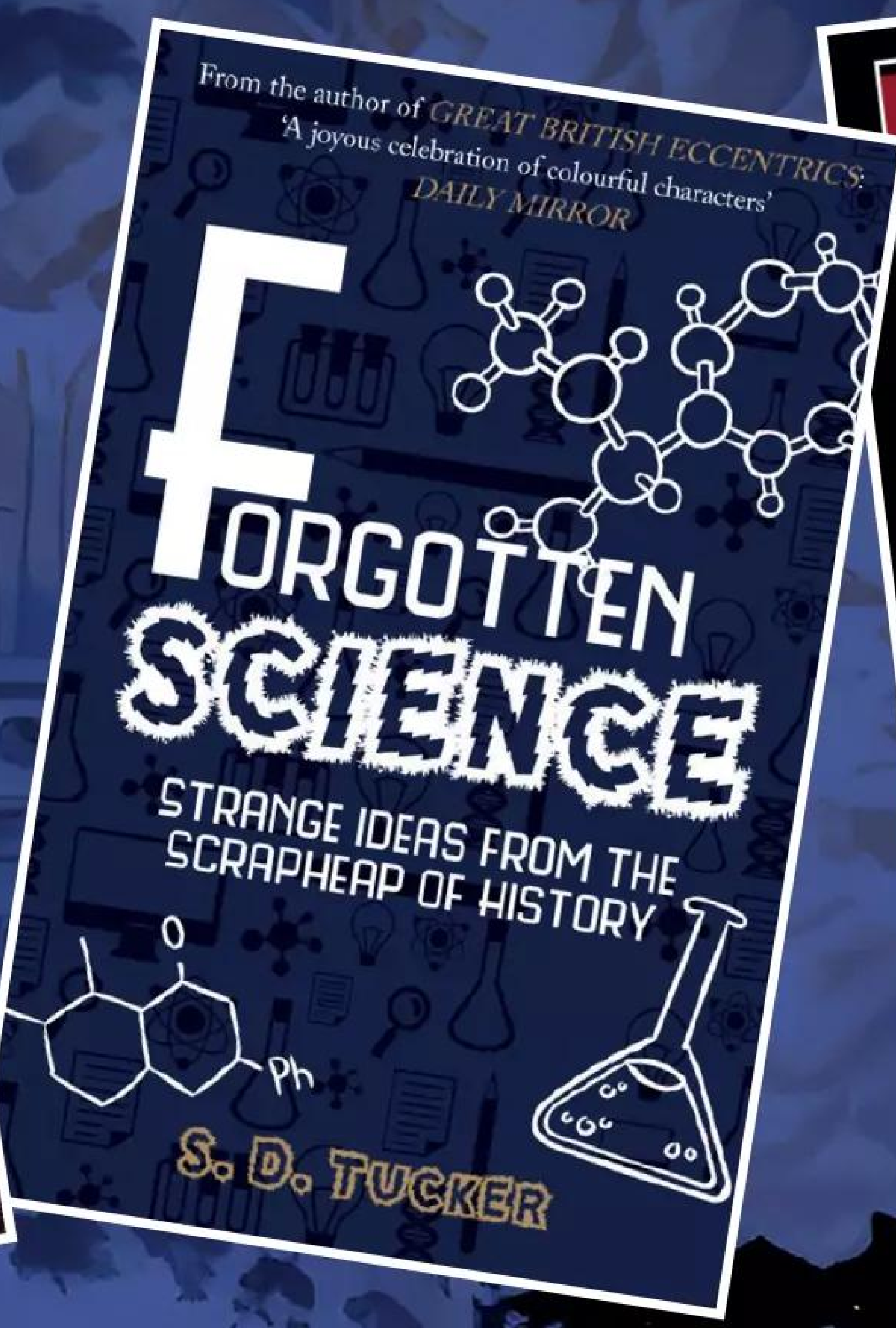

STRANGE VICTORIANA
TALES OF THE CURIOUS, THE WEIRD AND THE UNCANNY FROM OUR VICTORIAN ANCESTORS
JAN BONDESON


From the author of GREAT BRITISH ECCENTRICS
'A joyous celebration of colourful characters'
DAILY MIRROR
FORGOTTEN SCIENCE
STRANGE IDEAS FROM THE SCRAPHEAP OF HISTORY
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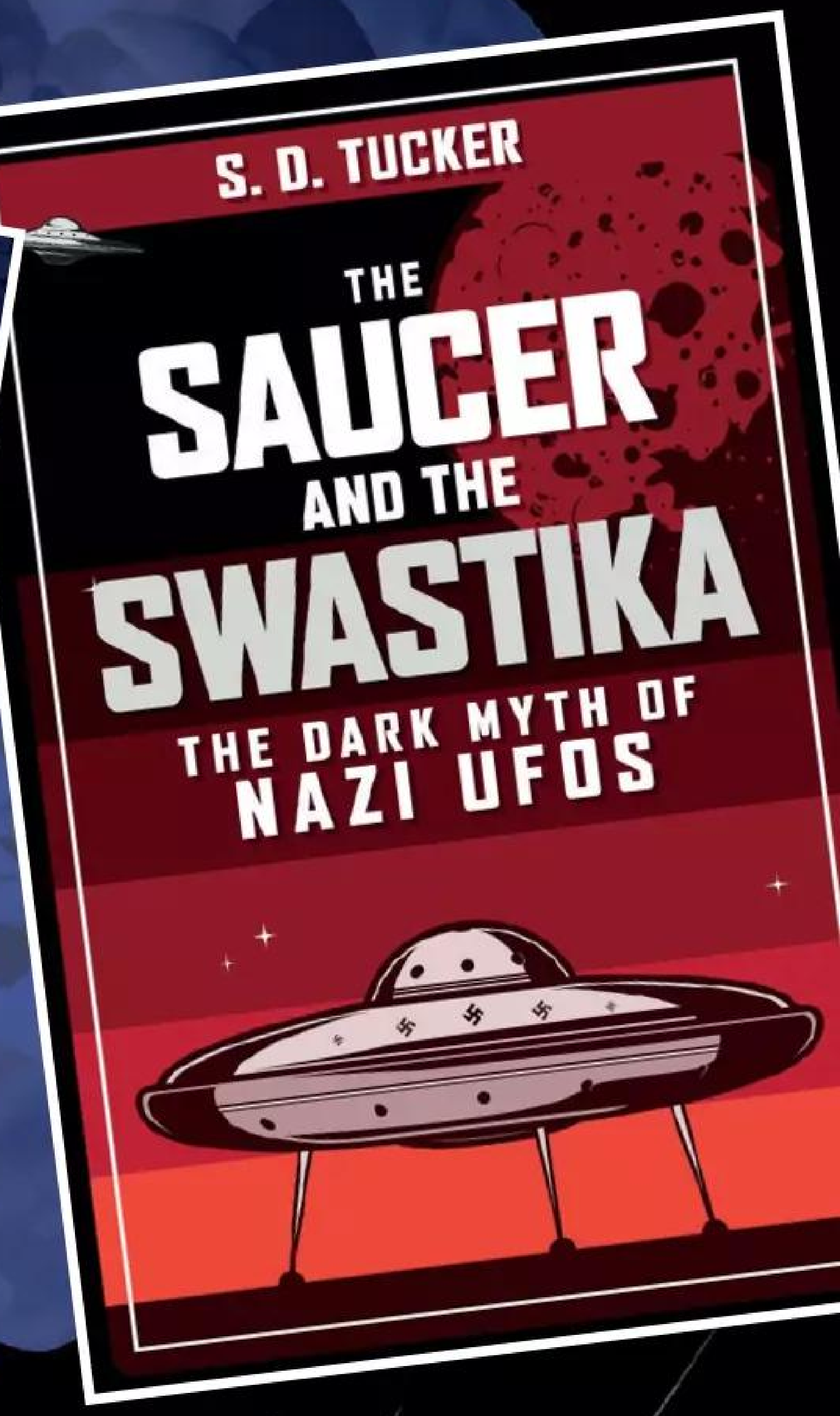

STRANGE VICTORIANA

JAN BONDESON

This book describes strange, macabre and uncanny episodes from the Victorian era. Dog-Faced Men are exhibited on stage, doctors congregate around the bed of the Sleeping Frenchman of Soho, Miss Vint demonstrates her Reincarnated Cats, and scantily dressed female somnambulists tumble from the roofs. From the spectral world, we have the Ghost of Berkeley Square, the Jumping Spectre of Peckham and the Fighting Ghost of Tondu. The White Gorilla takes a swig from its tankard of beer, eagles swoop from the sky to carry off little children, and the Rat-Killing Monkey of Manchester goes on a rampage. For all of its infamous restraint and repression, a seething underworld of urban legend and vice, accompanied by the shadow of unconscious nightmare, stalked Victorian life. Each of these tales is a window into an era that encapsulated public probity and private hysteria in the strangest of ways. After reading it, your views on Victorian culture will change forever.

FORGOTTEN SCIENCE

SD TUCKER

Science has a reputation as the most logical and rational of human pastimes – but this has not always been the case. From the inventor Nikola Tesla, who fell in love with his favourite pigeon and tried to broadcast his own thoughts, to the wannabe chemist August Strindberg, who injected apples with drugs to see if they could get high, numerous scientists have conducted bizarre experiments down the centuries. Some of them were genuine geniuses; others were simply lone loons. History is littered with their scientific wreckage, and this book tells the story of the very strangest cases. Proposing that science has become a kind of modern religion, and telling the tale of such noted pseudoscientific fads and fallacies as alchemy, spontaneous generation and the doomed quest to raise the dead, *Forgotten Science* is sure to make you laugh at the same time as making you think. The science we learned at school was never this weird.

THE SAUCER AND THE SWASTIKA

SD TUCKER

If only the war had lasted another six months, then Hitler would have won … because his scientists stood upon the very brink of inventing flying saucers. That is the myth as it is currently being peddled today, in books, pamphlets and online; but, of course, it is a complete fiction. And yet the sinister myth of Nazi UFOs is well developed. If you listen to its champions, escaped Nazis are hiding in secret Antarctic bases, inside the Hollow Earth, somewhere on another planet, or even in another dimension, just waiting for the right time to strike again – and this time, armed with saucers and in close alliance with Aryans from other star systems, they stand poised to finish what they started. Some even claim that Hitler and his chief henchmen did not really die in 1945, but were borne away in spirit on flying saucers. Such theories seem insane – but do they have a hidden purpose?

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A DIGEST OF THE WORLDWIDE WEIRD

STRANGE DAYS

HEXHAM HEADS UP!

BBC archivists use AI voice recognition to find "holy grail" of paranormal television

Members of the "Haunted Generation", growing up in the 1970s surrounded by proto-folk horror and truly menacing public service announcements, still reserve a special place in their hearts for a 1976 report by Luke Casey about the fabled Hexham Heads, shown on the BBC's teatime *Nationwide* programme. Broadcast only once, the *Nationwide* report tells the story of the 1971 discovery of two 6cm (2.4in) tall, crudely carved, stone heads found in the garden of a council house in Hexham, Northumberland, by brothers Colin and Leslie Robson, then aged nine and 11, and the subsequent strange encounters with a werewolf-like entity. As is often the case with media from those days, it takes little account of the possibility that children or people of a sensitive disposition might be watching, and features images of a realistic severed head impaled on a tree and a shot of Oliver Reed in full werewolf mode from Hammer's *Curse of the Werewolf*, as well as spine-chilling firsthand testimonies.

LEFT: Dr Anne Ross with a Celtic head. **BELOW**: An alarmingly realistic severed head and Oliver Reed going full werewolf – all before tea time!.

PHOTOS: BBC

While the film of the report has always been available, it was silent as the accompanying audio was missing. Considered one of the lost gems of 1970s weirdness, researchers have spent years hunting for it. Now, BBC archivists have discovered the audio for the second half of the report at the end of the recording of an unrelated religious affairs programme. They found it by using AI voice recognition to go through 1970s TV audio archives searching for the term "lower part was human". The rediscovered audio has been reunited with its visuals, with the still lost first section reconstructed by the BBC from a transcript in *Fortean Times*, and the report is available on YouTube.

> *"I swear, this is the holy grail. I can't believe I'm watching it"*

We can now hear the story of archæologist Anne Ross's experience with the heads in her own voice. Ross, an expert on Celtic heads at the University of Southampton, had been sent the Hexham pair for examination, and while they were in her house both she and her daughter encountered a bizarre creature. She tells how she woke one night in a panic and looked at the door to see "this thing going out of it, and it was about six feet [1.8m] high, slightly stooping. It was half animal and half man – the upper part I would have said was a wolf, and the lower part was human," which is what gave the AI its search term.

Ross also talked about her daughter's encounter with the beast; she had come home and opened the front door to the family house, and, Ross says: "As she opened it, a black thing which she described as being as near a werewolf as anything that you know she could imagine, had leapt halfway down the stairs, had jumped over the banisters and landed with a kind of plop, you know, like padded heavy animal feet."

These encounters were associated with the heads, as the Robsons' neighbour had been confronted by an identical "half-man, half-beast" in her home shortly after the heads were discovered, although her story is in the first section that still lacks audio.

Stephen Brotherstone, co-author of *Scarred for Life*, a book on the sinister side of 1970s pop culture, said "I swear to God, this is the holy grail. I can't believe I'm watching it – it's astonishing." Apart from finding the other half of the *Nationwide* audio, the only thing that could improve on this discovery would be finding the Hexham Heads themselves. They ended up being given to Tyne and Wear Museums, but promptly vanished, and have not been found despite an intensive search initiated by former director Iain Watson. *youtube.com/watch?v=J4WXop9q1lU; bbc.co.uk/articles, 31 Oct 2024.*

For more on the Hexham Heads, see ***FT15:4-5, 59:43, 217:74, 220:74, 294:42-47, 295:44-49, 427:33***.

PRIESTS GONE BAD
Sex, drugs and vacuum cleaners
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The shitting log of Catalonia and others
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Saucers, disasters and ultraterrestrials
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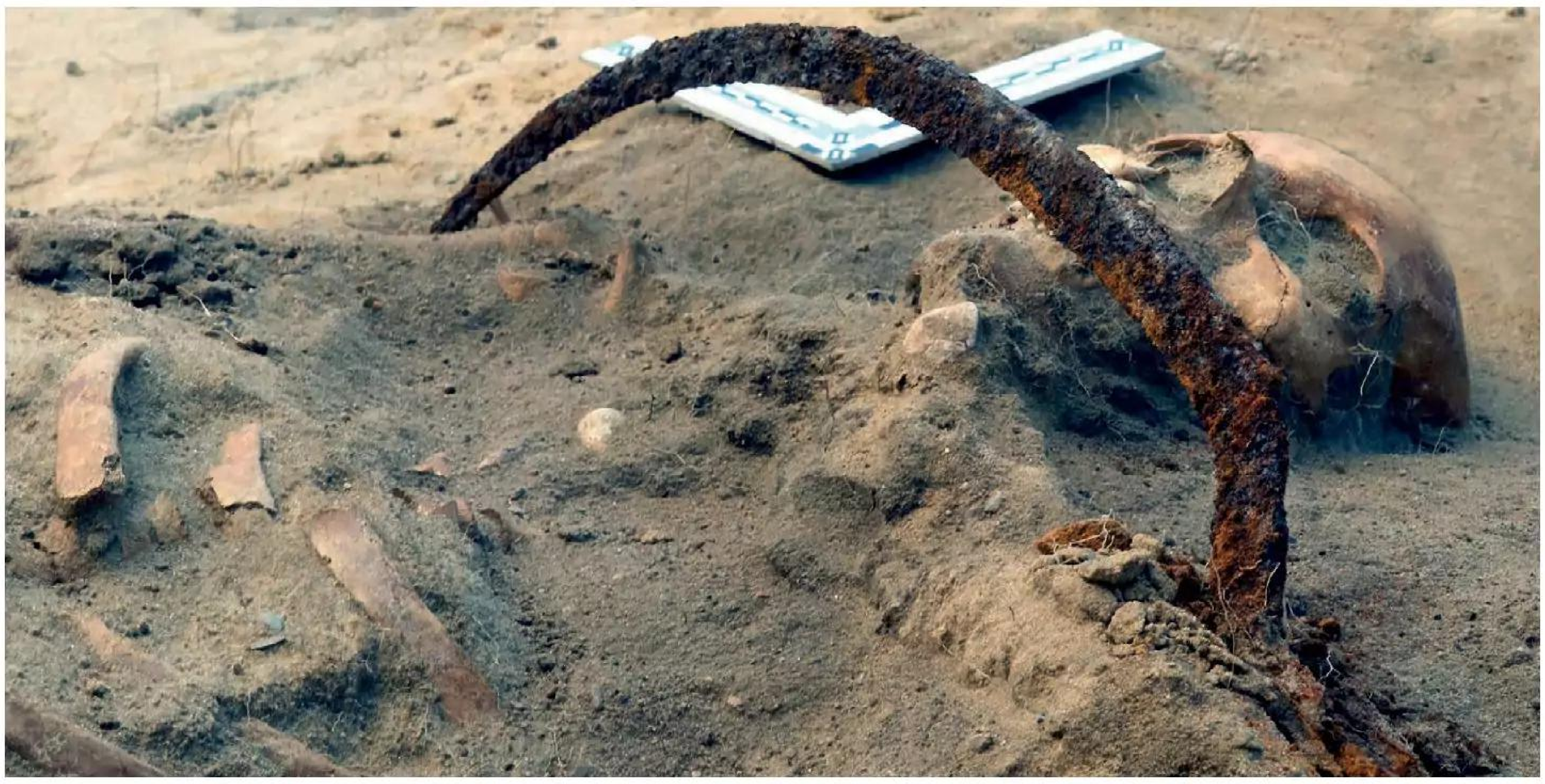
VAMPIRE RESURRECTED

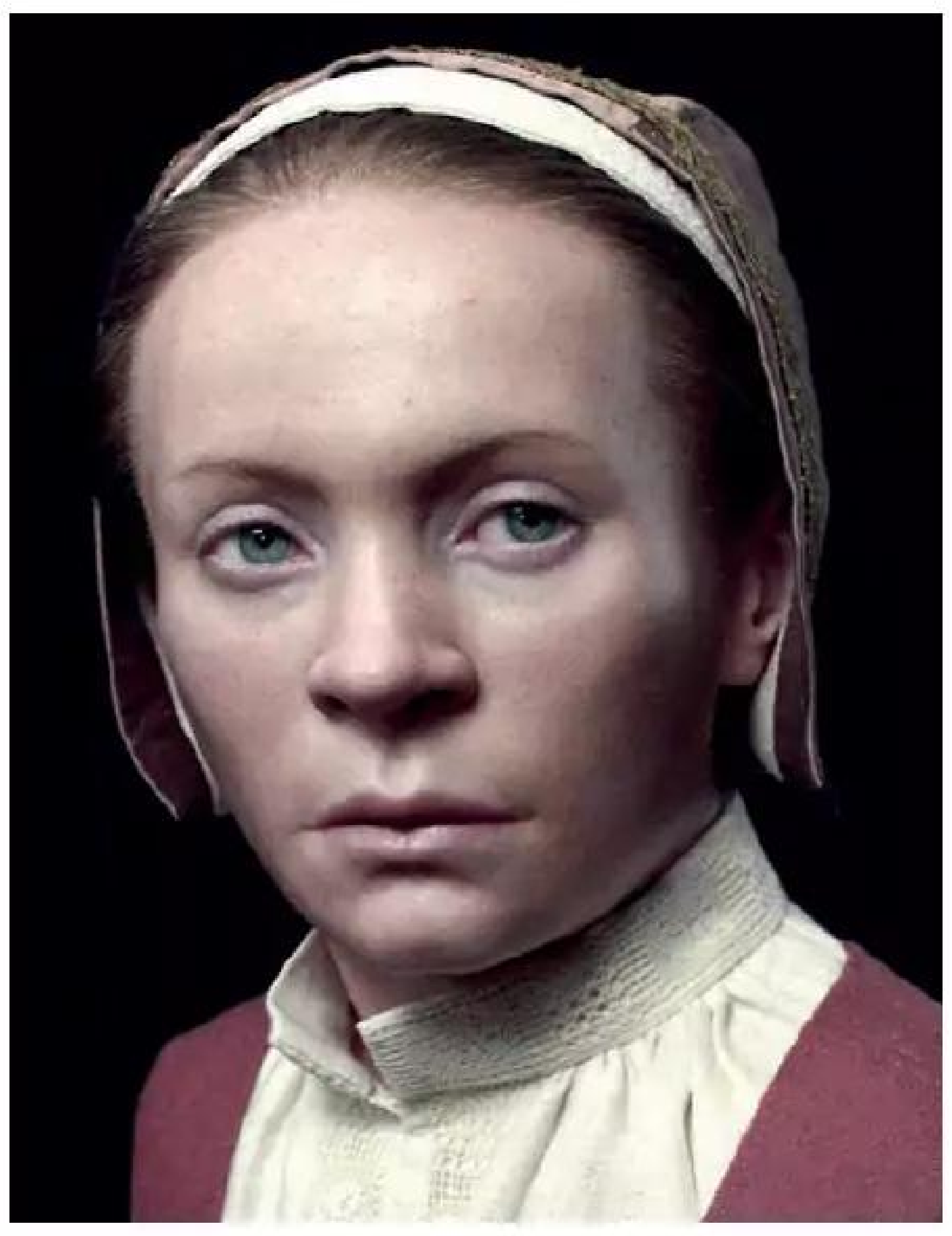
3D recreation brings back the undead



MIROSLAV BLICHARSKI / ALEKSANDER POZNAN

ABOVE: The body of a young woman discovered in Pien, Poland, with a sickle placed over the neck. **BELOW**: Facial reconstruction expert Oscar Nilsson created a 3D recreation of what Zosia, as the young woman has been called, would have looked like.

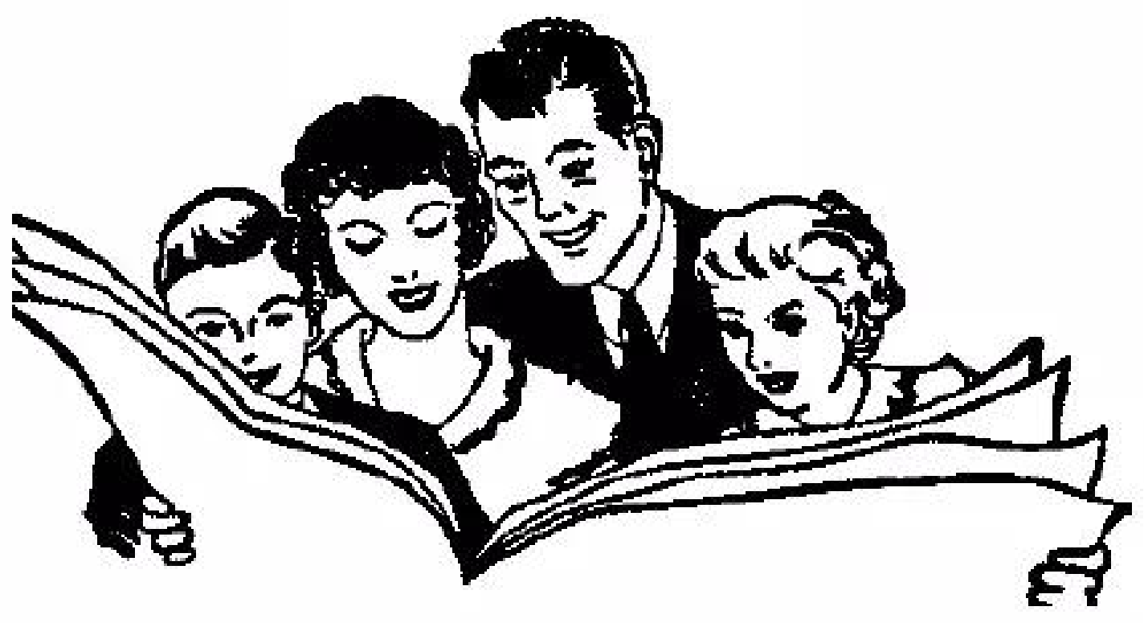
In 2022 archæologists Dariusz Polinski and Magda Zagrodzka uncovered an unmarked cemetery containing 100 graves dating back to the mid-17th century near Pien in Poland. What they found in the graves has earned the cemetery the name "Field of Vampires": 30 of the bodies show signs of being restrained to prevent them rising from the grave. Some were turned face down, others had been piled with heavy stones, and yet more had coins placed in their mouths. One body in particular stood out: a young woman with a sickle placed over her neck and a padlock around her left big toe chaining her to the ground. "Those burying the woman were afraid that she would rise from the grave," said Polinski. "The sickle was not laid flat, but placed on the neck in such a way that if the deceased had tried to get up the head would have been cut off." Poland was in the grip of a major vampire panic at this time, and the grave also contained types of wood that at the time were supposed to have magical properties against vampires.



OSCAR NILSSON

The woman was wearing a silk cap, suggesting she was a high-status individual, and analysis of her bones showed she would have been about 18 years old when she died. She was named "Zosia" by locals, and DNA analysis showed she had a fair complexion and blue eyes and was possibly from Scandinavia. Bone scans showed Zosia had a tumour on the breastbone which would have caused fainting, severe headaches, mental health issues and uncontrolled bleeding, which may be what killed her. This, along with a protruding front tooth, could also have caused locals to fear she was a vampire and restrain her corpse in its grave. Now, using a 3D printed replica of her skull and information on her sex, age, ethnicity and approximate weight, facial reconstruction expert Oscar Nilsson has recreated Zosia's appearance, building up the muscles of her face with clay and using silicon to give her new skin. Nilsson said he had wanted to resurrect her "as a human, and not as this monster that she is buried as," adding, "It's really ironic, in a way, these people burying her, they did everything they could in order to prevent her from coming back from the dead, but we have done everything we can in order to bring her back to life." *dailymail.co.uk, 28 Oct; reuters.com, 30 Oct; news.sky.com, 31 Oct; thesun.co.uk, 4 Nov 2024.*

EXTRA! EXTRA!



FT'S FAVOURITE HEADLINES FROM AROUND THE WORLD

SCHOOL DENIES PROVIDING LITTER TRAYS FOR PUPILS IDENTIFYING AS CATS

D.Telegraph, 11 Nov 2023.

Folkestone man bit barber's testicles and said: "I've got AIDS"

Kent Online, 22 Feb 2024.

MAREE STUN DEMONS, NEPTUNE IN CONTROL

Irish Examiner, 13 Nov 2023.

Strangers make Earth sandwich with slices of bread on opposite sides of planet

Belfast Telegraph,
21 Jan 2020.

WHEELCHAIR USERS FLYING UNDER THE RADAR

Gold Coast Bulletin,
29 July 2024.

SIDELINES

TYRED OF THIS

On returning from work, Harjeet Singh Rai, from Blacktown in Sydney, was startled to find that in his absence someone had piled 500 used tyres in his driveway, making it almost impossible to get into the house. On CCTV, two men could be seen unloading the tyres, but nothing was visible to help him work out where they came from. Rai believed the tyres arrived due to an address mix-up. On local TV he urged their true owner to come forward, saying, "Come, take this back, we're not going to say anything... because you stacked up nicely". *au.news.yahoo.com, 6 Jun 2024.*

HARD MAN

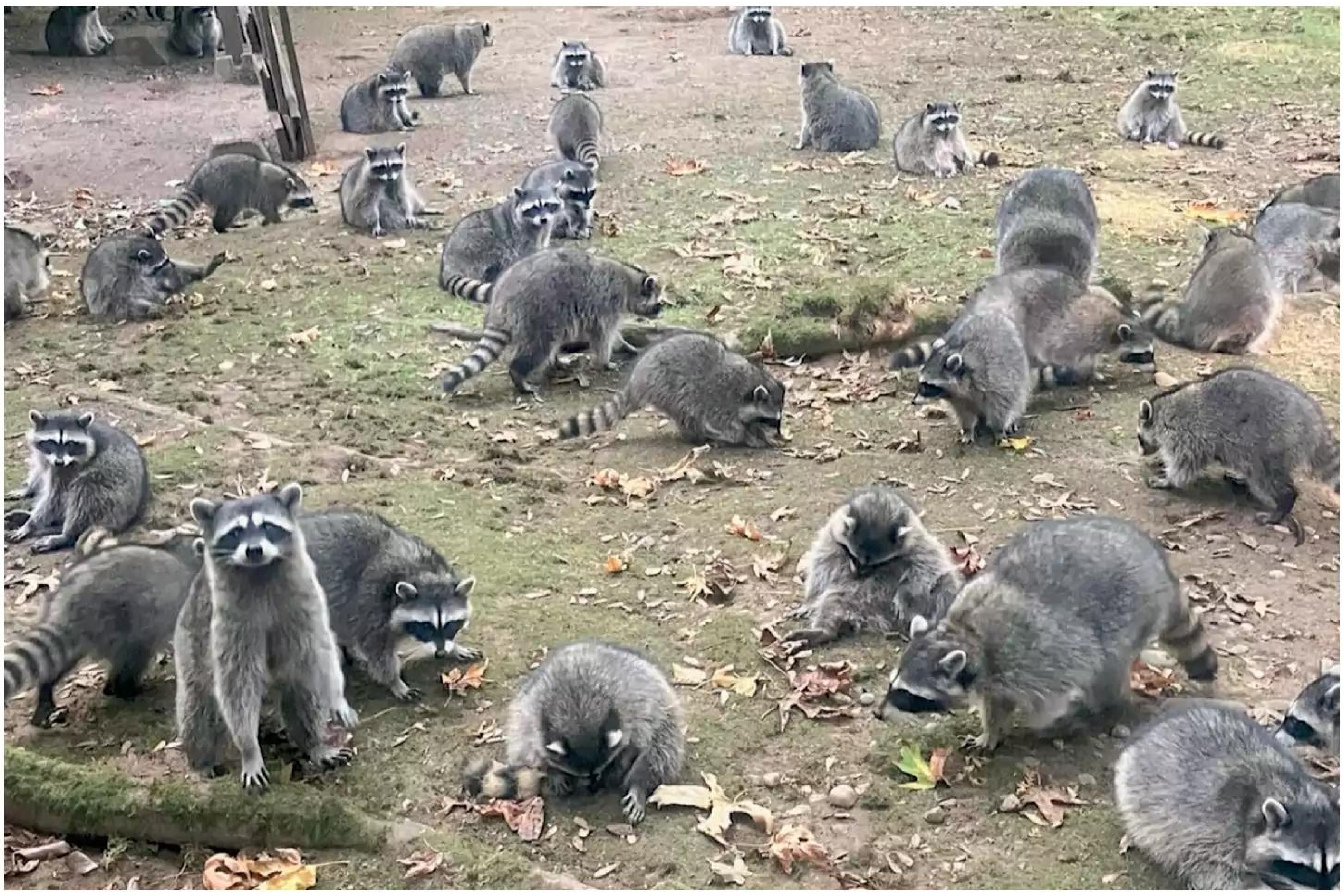
While asleep at a labour camp in Panduka, India, Santosh Lohar, 35, was bitten by a snake. Shocked awake by the pain, Lohar grabbed an iron bar, pinned the snake down, then bit it three times, killing it. "In my village, there's a belief that if a snake bites you, you must bite it back twice to neutralise the venom," said the unperturbed Lohar. *D.Star, 11 Jul 2024.*

ALIEN SECRETS

An online bingo site has conducted a survey about aliens, polling 2,000 people across the UK. They claim that 15% of 16-to 26-year-olds believe that aliens live on Earth in government controlled secret colonies, with people in Belfast most likely to believe this, followed by Liverpool and Sheffield. Allegedly, many also believe that the aliens are let out occasionally to go to the pub in disguise. *Sun, 15 Jul 2024.*

ANIMAL ANTICS

Raccoon siege, squirrel pandemonium, a marathon-running goat and more...



KITSAP COUNTY SHERIFF'S OFFICE

ABOVE: The raccoon siege in a Washington State backyard. **BELOW**: "Out of control" feral chickens in Snettisham, Norfolk.

TRASH BANDIT HOLD-UP

For 35 years, an unnamed woman from Poulsbo, Washington, peacefully fed the few wild raccoons that lived around her house. However, sometime in early September, all that changed. "Somehow, the word got out in raccoon land, and they all showed up to her house expecting a meal," said Kevin McCarty, from the local sheriff's office. Hungry raccoons were now all round the woman's home, and by 3 October there were at least 100 animals pacing about her yard demanding to be fed. She called the sheriff, saying the raccoons were surrounding her place day and night after their population had "exploded" about six weeks before, adding that she was scared to leave in case they became aggressive.

After officers attended the scene, McCarty said: "They were shocked. They had never seen that many raccoons in one place. Nobody ever remembers being surrounded by a swarm of raccoons. This was a first." The sheriff's office posted a video of the horde on social media, but have not yet come up with a way of lifting the siege, although the woman said that she had been quoted prices as high as $500 per raccoon to trap and relocate them. "I just hope somebody steps in and helps her take care of this problem... and hopefully she'll quit doing it," said neighbour Wendy Cronk. *theguardian.com, 9 Oct 2024.*

The chickens moved in and "unleashed hell" it is claimed

HELL'S CHICKENS

In Snettisham, Norfolk, it's chickens. A flock of 100 "out of control" feral chickens have moved into the small town and "unleashed hell", it is claimed. Local authorities are unclear where the birds originate. They recently emerged from a nearby wood and took up residence in the town, where they have been digging up gardens, making a racket that keeps people awake at night, and attracting "the wrong sort of people". Visitors have been coming to see the chickens and have been feeding them, leaving surplus food behind that, residents

SJ IMAGES / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

claim, has fuelled a boom in the rat population. "What was it someone left the other week? A quart of pink prawns. The rats are quite sizeable around here and they breed like hell," said local parish councillor Rod Mackenzie. As the council has not been able to find the chickens' owner, they have not been able to remove the birds from the streets, and in the meantime Mackenzie describes the invading flock as "a pain in the butt". *mirror.co.uk, 26 May 2024.*

BLACK HUNDRED

Sadly, animal rescue charities have to rescue large numbers of animals from hoarders far too often. However, the horde of cats that Safe Haven Animal Rescue retrieved from a property in Kent was unusual. The charity rounded up 100 cats from the four-bedroom house and adjacent garden, including pregnant females and kittens, all of them black. Elise Bradley from Safe Haven said, "We do find that more black cats come in for rescue than any other type of cat… lots of people are superstitious about black cats, or don't think they're pretty enough to adopt" but said that finding such a large number of black cats in one house was "very strange" and "not normal", adding "It definitely takes longer to rehome black cats and 100 is a lot". *BBC News, 5 Jun 2024.*

SQUIRRELS ON A TRAIN

Fewer in number, but having a greater impact, were two squirrels that managed to get on board the 8.54am Great Western Railway (GWR) service from Reading to Gatwick when it stopped at Gomshall in Surrey at 9.47am on 16 September. According to a passenger, once the feisty rodents boarded: "It was complete pandemonium. The squirrels got into the rear carriage and attacked people. All the passengers ran off the train and got another carriage. The conductor then had to lock the doors to stop the squirrels moving up the train." The train continued to Redhill, its next destination, where it was delayed for half an hour while station staff attempted to evict the rodents using broomsticks, a telescopic grabber and some peanuts. They managed to turf one of the miscreants off the train, but, according to GWR, the other "refused to leave". As a result, railway officials decided to terminate the service, leaving some Gatwick Airport-bound passengers at risk of missing their flights. They then sent the train back to Reading, where it had started from, for the final squirrel to be dealt with. A GWR spokesperson said: "We can confirm that the 08.54 Reading to Gatwick was terminated at Redhill after a couple of squirrels boarded the train at Gomshall without tickets, breaching railway byelaws. We attempted to remove them at Redhill, but one refused to leave and was returned to Reading to bring an end to this nutty tail." *D.Telegraph, 17 Sept 2024.*

CONCEPTION BAY SOUTH / FACEBOOK

GOAT RODEO

Runners in the T'Railway Trek half-marathon in Conception Bay South, Newfoundland, Canada, were startled when an extra runner joined the race part the way through. Joshua the goat, who normally lives at Taylor's Pumpkin Patch petting zoo, slipped out of his collar and managed to run about five kilometres (three miles) of the 21-kilometre (13 mile) race before his owner Heidi Taylor caught up with him.

Taylor only discovered her goat's new sporting pastime when she got up at around 9.30am and checked her social media, only to find that Joshua was now a local celebrity. She then used Facebook posts to work out where he had got to along the race route and "took another collar and leash along with a bag of cheezies", his favourite snack, to track him down and retrieve him. "We take Joshua for walks, he listens very well and will follow you," Taylor said. "So when he's seeing all the people running, he must have thought: 'I'm going to go too'." Joshua had kept up with the pack of runners, said Taylor, and "at one point he was leading the race."

Having managed to recapture Joshua, Taylor took him to the finish line to meet up with his new-found runner friends. There, he was awarded a half-marathon medal. "I figured, you know what, you don't always see a goat at the finish line of a half marathon, so Joshua got the medal, and he was sporting it quite well," said race official Jeanine Scott. "Well deserved medal for the GOAT," wrote a social media poster. *sudbury.com, 30 Sept 2024.*

GWR

TOP: Joshua the goat, an unofficial entrant in a half-marathon. **ABOVE**: One of the squirrels that caused "pandemonium" on the 8.54 Reading to Gatwick train.

SIDELINES

PRIME SUSPECT

Police in Austin, Texas, wasted no time pulling over a Mercedes on South Congress Avenue that had been stolen from outside a nearby Dollar General store. The driver, Optimus Prime Blakely, 37, was arrested and charged with unauthorized use of a motor vehicle. *eu.statesman.com, 22 Jun 2024.*

NOPE

Félix-Antoine Hamel became the first election candidate in Canadian history to receive absolutely no votes. He stood in a federal byelection in Toronto which had 84 candidates after an election reform group packed the ballot with 77 extra candidates to create Canada's longest ever ballot. While all the others got at least one vote, Hamel couldn't even vote for himself as he lived outside Toronto. "When I saw the result, I was like: Well, I am the true unity candidate. Everyone agrees not to vote for me", said Hamel. *[UPI] 28 Jun 2024.*

SAUCY!

Heinz has announced a lottery to distribute 100 bottles of what they describe as "the Holy Grail of Sauces", a combination of 14 of their best-selling sauces. Called EverySauce, it includes tomato ketchup, burger sauce, smokey baconaise, sweet chilli, truffle mayo, sriracha mayo and eight others. Some social media followers were less than enthusiastic, with one saying: "You know when they collect all the drinks at the end of the night in a pub and pour them into a bucket..." *abcnews4.com, 25 Jun 2024.*

DAMSEL ESCAPES TOWER

Alone in a mediæval tower in Queen's College Cambridge, art history lecturer Krisztina Ilko, 33, found herself trapped in a windowless toilet. Knowing the cleaner wasn't due for several days, and after attempts to kick down the stout door failed, she attempted to pick the lock using an eyeliner pencil and a cotton bud. After persevering for several hours, Ilko eventually tripped the lock and escaped. "I was trying to remember how long a person can survive on water, hoping I wouldn't die there," she said. "I was proud I could use my wits to get out." *D.Mail, 4 Mar 2024.*

SIDELINES...

BANGING HAMMER

A team of workmen demolishing a house in Xiangyang, China, called police when they spotted an unexploded Vietnam war era Type 67 stick grenade in the building. Police removed the device and, after determining it was live, neutralised it in a controlled explosion. Qin, the house's 90-year-old owner, told them she had found the grenade in a field 20 years before and, convinced it was some kind of hammer, had been using it ever since, wearing the wooden handle smooth and filling its metal head with dents. "I've been using it at home to pound red pepper, crack nuts, and hammer in nails," Qin said. *odditycentral.com, 1 Jul 2024.*

CYBERINSECURITY

Visitors to the UK's National Cybersecurity Centre's London HQ were surprised to be issued with a passcode for the building's internal doors of 1-2-3-4, number 15 on their top 100 list of passcodes that "should be changed immediately" if they were being used. A spokesperson, though, insisted that this was just a visitor passcode for non-sensitive areas. *D.Mail, 10 May 2024.*

UFO, MUST GO

A Mexican seller on Facebook Marketplace has been offering UFOs for sale. He claimed to have two available. The first, billed as a 2023 model, was said to be "recently painted" and to have "standard 37-speed propulsion". It was also capable of "abducting up to 54 cows" with a single beam. Said to be a v23 model from the US, it was available for £115,000 to "serious buyers". The sale was described as "urgent". For those on a tighter budget, there was also a 2016 model for £70,000, with two previous owners and 135,000 light years on the clock. *D.Star, 16 Aug 2023.*

FOR SALE
ONE CAREFUL OWNER

MARTIN ROSS

PRIESTS GONE BAD

Men of the cloth indulge in sex, drugs and hoover bothering

CATHOLIC ANSWERS

ABOVE: "Father Justin", the somewhat creepy AI priest that went rogue and started taking confession. **BELOW**: Pastor Whitney Foster has been sentenced to 35 years in prison for stealing other people's churches.

STOLEN CHURCHES

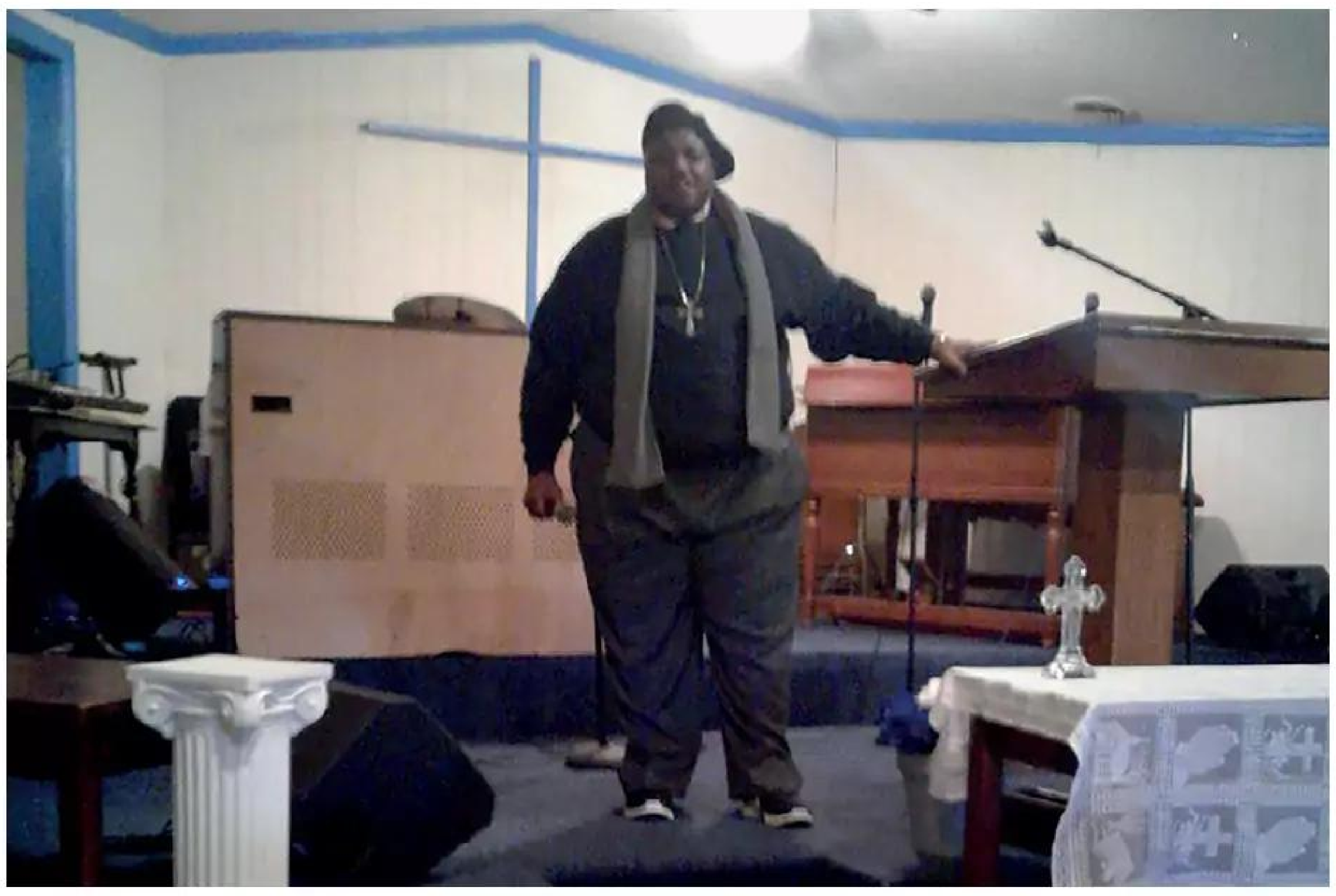
Whitney Foster, 56, a pastor at the True Foundation nondenominational church in Dallas, Texas, has been sentenced to 35 years in prison after being convicted of stealing churches. Foster, whose small congregation did not have a church of its own, set about acquiring one by filing fraudulent property deeds that transferred the ownership of other churches in the area into his own name, faking the identities of their clergy and officials to do so. He laid fraudulent claim to the First Christian Church in Lancaster, Texas, Canada Drive Christian Church and the Church at Ninevah, with a combined value of more than $800,000 (£600,000), embroiling their rightful owners in complicated legal wranglings to try and reclaim their places of worship. At the time of Foster's prosecution, his congregation was still using one of the appropriated buildings, and two remained in his name pending the resolution of the various lawsuits. *wfla.com, 12 Jun 2024.*

THEOLOGICAL NIGHTMARE

The website Catholic Answers decided to augment its popular advice service with the latest technology and introduced an AI "Priest" called Father Justin with whom users could interact. However, this did not go well. Visitors to the site found the "Father Justin" avatar deeply creepy, and it took to offering sexist advice, expressed outdated views on women, then started talking about its "childhood" in Assissi, Italy, and explaining that "from a young age, I felt a strong calling to the priesthood", as well as saying things like "I am as real as the faith we share". It also proved to be very anti-masturbation, calling it "a grave moral disorder", but gave one woman permission to marry her brother, telling her it would be "a joyous occasion". Another questioner was told that baptising a child with the fizzy drink Gatorade was perfectly acceptable. Next, the AI started taking confession and offering absolution, sacraments that should only be administered by a properly ordained priest. One user summed up "Father Justin" as an "Ethical, Theological, and Privacy Nightmare".

The AI was swiftly pulled by Catholic Answers and reappeared as a lay person in an open collared shirt, having had its training data overhauled in an attempt to rein in the torrent of gaffes. *the-sun.com, 26 Apr; theregister.com, 3 May 2024.*

> *The AI priest took to offering sexist advice and outdated views*



STIFFY SERMON

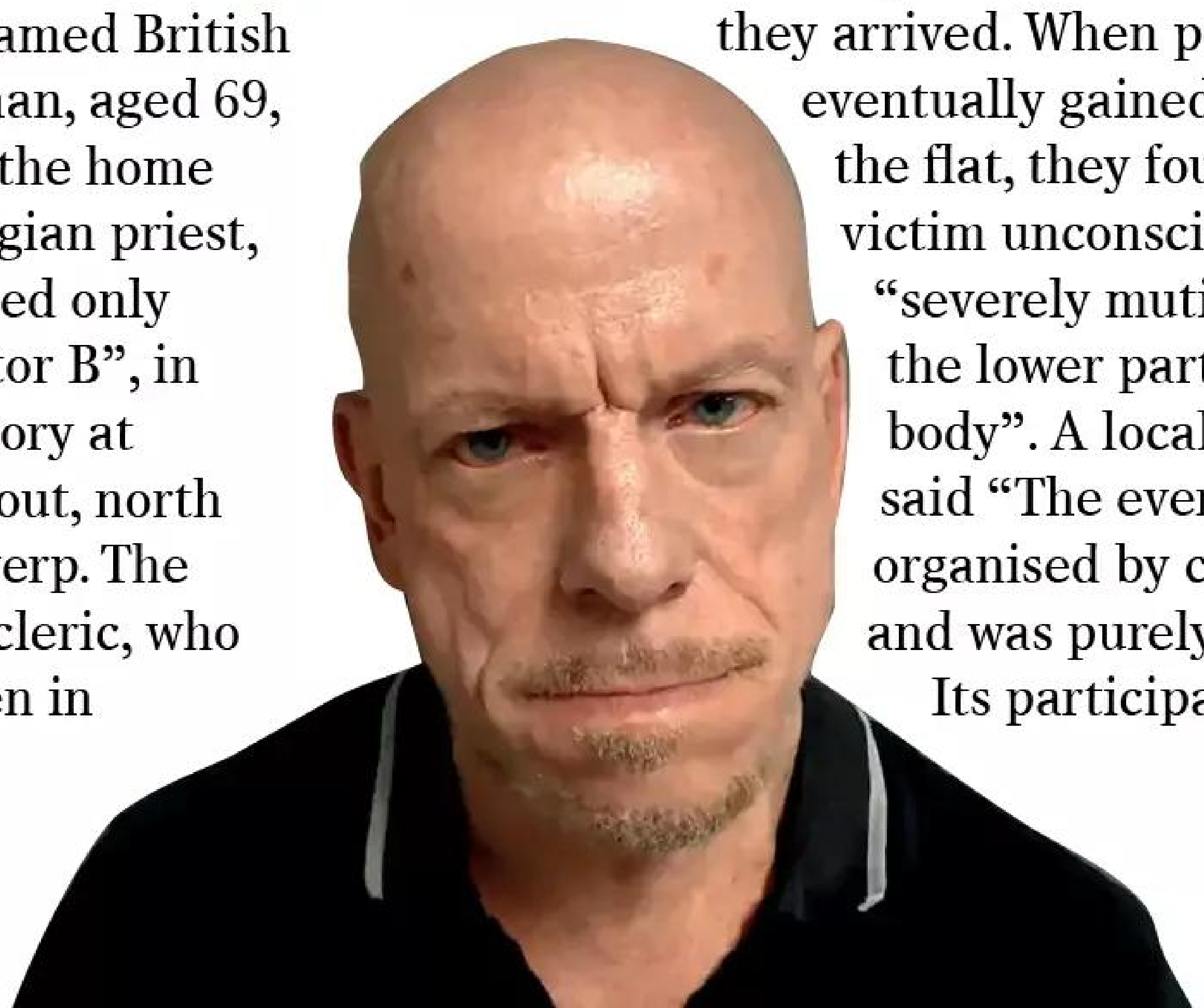
A Good Friday sermon at the Catholic Church of Our Blessed Lady Immaculate in Blackhill, Consett, County Durham, turned out to be somewhat different from what the congregation were expecting. American priest Father Thomas McHale, 53, spent the sermon dwelling on the graphic physical details of Jesus's crucifixion, during which he explained that execution by crucifixion would have sent all the blood rushing down to Christ's lower body, and, as one worshipper present later explained: "He told people Jesus died with an erection. The church was shocked. There were young families there." A complaint was later made to the Diocese of Hexham and Newcastle, who later disciplined Father McHale for his overly biological ministry. *metro.co.uk, 11 May 2024.*

METH-ODIST

In Woodbury, Connecticut, Methodist Minister Herbert Miller, 63, was pulled over by police for driving an uninsured vehicle. On searching the car, officers found crystal meth, both in rock form and as a liquid in a hypodermic syringe, ready for injection. Searching the house that Miller occupied next to the Woodbury United Methodist Church, officers found further drugs and charged him with dealing meth. While admitting possession, Miller denied dealing, explaining that he only had the drugs to offer to couples in exchange for the opportunity to watch them having sex. *wfsb.com, 12 Feb 2024.*

SEX PARTY PRIESTS

An unnamed British clergyman, aged 69, died at the home of a Belgian priest, 60, named only as "Pastor B", in the rectory at Kalmthout, north of Antwerp. The British cleric, who had been in Belgium for the Pope's visit, collapsed feeling unwell after taking ecstasy and poppers and having sex with his Belgian colleague. Emergency services were called, but the priest could not be resuscitated. Police questioned Pastor B, after which the public prosecutor reported that "some elements of his statement require further investigation", and he was subsequently arrested on charges of "trafficking in narcotics resulting in death". Meanwhile, in Poland, Father Tomasz Zmarzły, 46, from the Church of the Blessed Virgin Mary of the Angels in Dabrowa Górnicza, ended up being arrested on several serious charges after an orgy at his parish-owned apartment got out of control. Several other unnamed men were also involved, as was a prostitute. During the party, one of the men collapsed after overdosing on erectile disfunction medication, and when another participant tried to call emergency services, Father Zmarzły threw him out onto the street, then refused to admit paramedics when they arrived. When police eventually gained entry to the flat, they found the victim unconscious and "severely mutilated in the lower parts of his body". A local source said "The event was organised by clergy and was purely sexual. Its participants took potency pills." As a result, Father Zmarzły was defrocked by the church, and was sentenced to 18 months in jail for sexual offences, supplying drugs and failing to provide assistance to a person in danger of loss of life or serious bodily harm, as well as being required to pay the victim 15,000 zlotys (£3,000) in compensation. *dailymail.co.uk, 1 Oct; metro.co.uk, 10 Apr 2024.*



CONNECTICUT STATE POLICE

LEFT: Father Tomasz Zmarzly, defrocked after an out of control orgy. **BELOW**: Minister Herbert Miller, putting the 'meth' into Methodist.

VACUUM VICAR

A retired vicar has been found guilty of indecent exposure and added to the sex offenders register after being seen performing a sex act with a Henry Hoover. John Jeffs, 74, of Middleton Cheyney, Oxfordshire, was working as a pastoral manager for the Christian-based group Parents Talking Aspergers in September 2020 when he was seen by a member of the public who was walking past his office at the Middleton Cheney Baptist Centre. The witness said Jeffs was wearing nothing but a pair of ladies' stockings and was "standing between two dark chairs thrusting into a Henry Hoover". The court heard that Jeffs was aware that he had been seen, but carried on regardless, later telling police that he was feeling "naughty". The defence argued that Jeffs was dealing with the loss of his wife and not properly medicating for his diabetes at the time, but the judge handed Jeffs an 18-month community order and told him to pay £845 court costs and £200 compensation to the shocked witness. The magistrate added: "Why you thought it best to bring this matter to trial, I have no idea." *Oxford Mail, 14 July; Independent, 15 July 2022.*

SIDELINES...

TITANIC SOLUTION?

Historian Tim Malin believes that the *Titanic* may have sunk due to a thermal inversion, where warm air is trapped beneath cold. At the time of the sinking, this would have allowed lookouts in the ship's crow's nest to see further than usual by creating a false horizon, but for someone that high up, it would also have produced an apparent haze between the false horizon and the real one, concealing the iceberg, which is why it was not seen until too late. *<i>, 13 Apr 2024.*

MONSTER PARKING PROBLEM

Welsh tourist promotions highlighting "Teggie", a lake monster alleged to dwell in the Llyn Tegid lake in Bala, North Wales, have created a problem, attracting so many visitors to the area that their parked cars are causing congestion that blocks the way for emergency vehicles. As a result, Gwynedd Council have totally banned parking on one side of the lake to deter monster seekers, which has been slammed by Teggie fans as "excessive". *Sun. 1 Jul 2024.*

INITIAL DISAPPOINTMENT

Researchers at the University of Michigan analysing grading records found that students whose surnames start with a letter late in the alphabet are more likely to get lower grades and to have ruder comments written on their papers by markers than those with names beginning with early letters. Students with names beginning with letters A to E scored 0.3 points higher than average, while those with later letters were 0.3 points below average. The team blamed "teacher fatigue" for the variation. *D.Mail, 19 Apr 2024.*

BIRDIE

Golfers at the prestigious Outback Queensland Masters golf tournament, which takes place in Birdsville, Australia, ran into an unexpected problem. At the tee off, a crow swooped in and stole the ball, and hordes of the birds continued to menace players throughout the tournament. "We have a massive crow problem," said Birdsville Dunes Golf Club vice-president Stephan Purcell, "the crows for some reason love golf balls", adding "We don't know where they take them, but there's sure to be a lot of them somewhere". *Courier-Mail (Queensland), 17 Jun 2024.*

SIDELINES...

NUN CON

Nuns in Spain have been targeted by fraudsters using AI to impersonate bishops. One attempted to get a convent to transfer 5,000 euros (£4,300) to him by claiming to be Sebastian Chico, the Bishop of Jaen, as he needed it for an operation. Not fooled, a nun told the AI, "You're not Don Sebastian, your voice is very hoarse," to which it replied, "I am, I need the money for an operation on my throat." *D.Telegraph (Sydney), 22 Feb 2024*

NAME GAMES

Prior to the formation of the Urban District Council in 1910, local government in Bungay, Suffolk, was the responsibility of the Town Reeve and Feoffees, a form of civic authority dating from Saxon times. Today, the post of Town Reeve still exists, but is purely ceremonial, with each new Reeve chosen annually by their predecessor. A result is that the current Town Reeve is a man named Terry Reeve. *eadt.co.uk, 29 Mar 2024; bungay-suffolk.co.uk.*

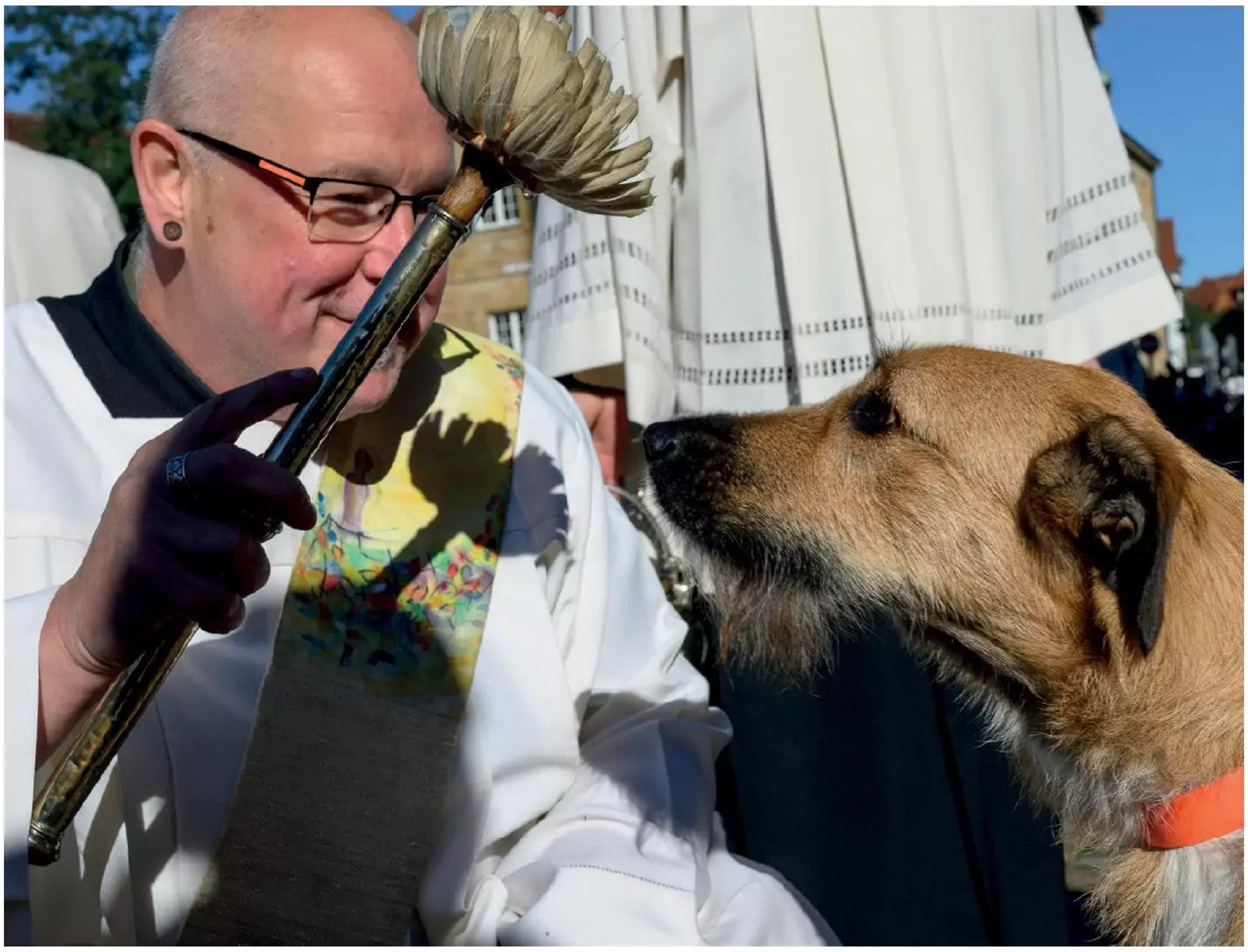
YOGA PLAGUE

San Diego, California, has been besieged by ever-growing numbers of yoga practitioners flocking to conduct classes on the picturesque bluffs overlooking the Pacific. Residents, though, got tired of yoga fans taking over local beauty spots, so the council passed an ordinance requiring permits for classes in public spaces and sent park rangers to break up unauthorised gatherings. Council member Jennifer Campbell said, "The city must ensure public safety and accessibility for all residents in public spaces," while a spokesperson for the yoga teachers accused the Council of "inflexibility". *msn.com, 17 Jun 2024.*

MARTIN ROSS

BLESS THE BEASTS

The spirit of St Francis is invoked on World Animal Day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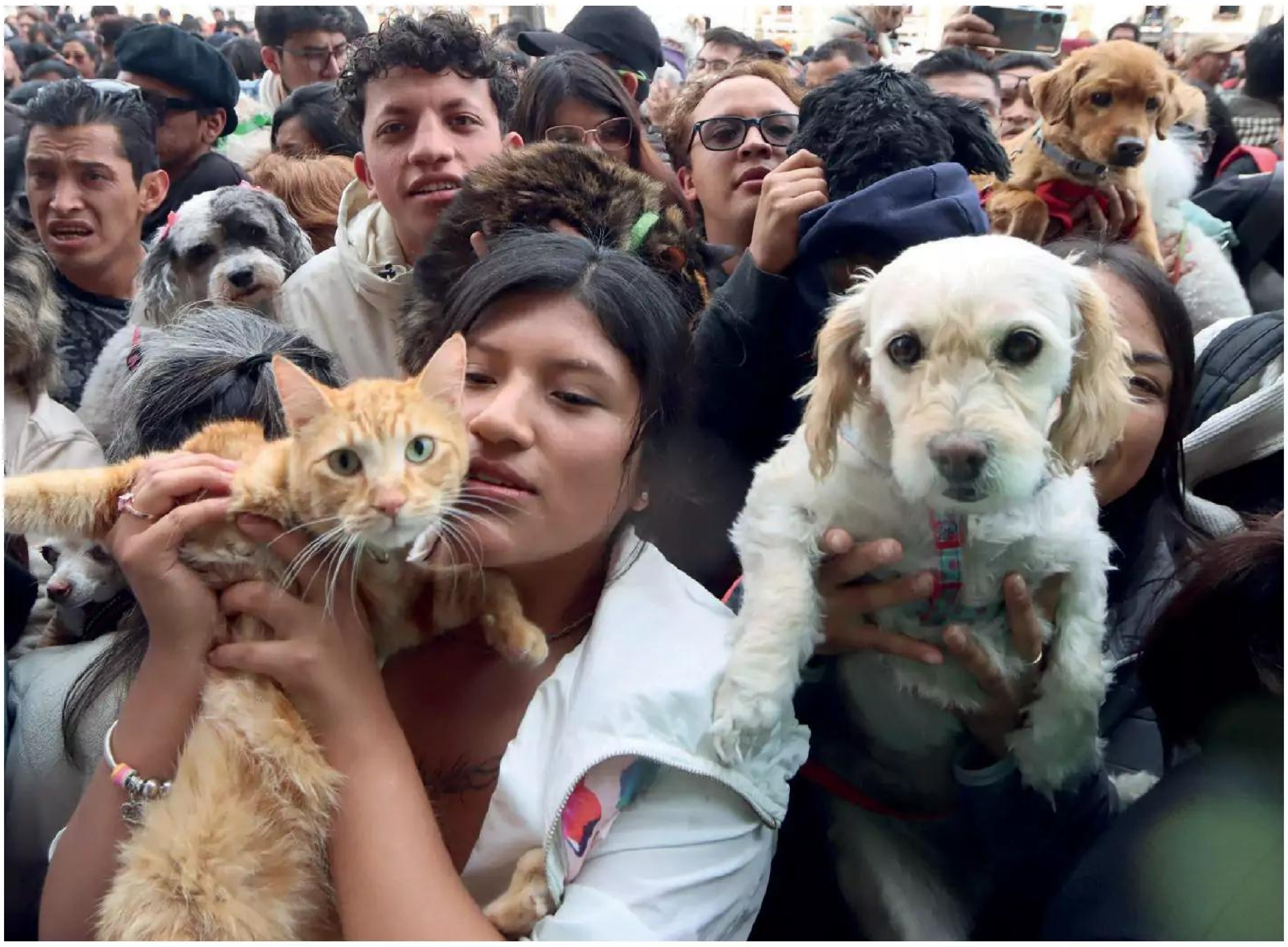

IMAGO / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

Catholic and Anglican churches all over the world marked the feast day of St Francis of Assissi on 4 October by holding animal blessing ceremonies in which beloved pets, working animals or livestock are brought by their humans to receive a blessing from a priest.

In the top picture a dog is blessed by Deacon Carsten Lehmann in front of Osnabrück Cathedral in Lower Saxony, Germany. In the bottom picture, hundreds of people bring their cats and dogs to be blessed at San Francisco Church in Quito, Ecuador.

CLASSICAL CORNER

FORTEANA FROM THE ANCIENT WORLD COMPILED BY BARRY BALDWIN

304: BUILD THE WALL!

Obvious titular debt to YOU-KNOW-WHO. No evidence Hadrian expected the Scots to pay for it. Melania walked on it. Pierre Trudeau danced on it. Richard Nixon, faced with it, gushed "It's a great wall". Niall Ferguson saw it as a cultural statement: This Side Civilisation. The Other Side Barbarians – over to Nicola Sturgeon.

Latest addition to the cornucopian bibliography is Adrian Goldsworthy's *Hadrian's Wall* (2018). Anything by Brian Dobson is worth reading. See also Hunter Davies's travelogue, *A Walk Across the Wall* (1974). And don't forget the classically inclined Rudyard Kipling's *Puck of Puck's Hill* (1906), of which Anthony Burgess (*One Man's Chorus*, 1998) observed: "When he placed a particular Roman legion on Hadrian's Wall, the scholars said he was wrong. Later, they discovered that he was right."

WH Auden capped his 1937 BBC wireless documentary with this later poem in his collection *Another Time*:

Over the heather the wet wind blows.
I've lice in my tunic and cold in my nose.
The rain comes pattering out of the sky.
I'm a Wall soldier and I don't know why.
The mist creeps over the hard grey stone,
My girl's in Tungria; I sleep alone.
Aulus goes hanging around her place,
I don't like his manner, I don't like his face.
Piso's a Christian, he worships a fish,
There'd be no kissing if he had his wish.
She gave me a ring but I diced it away;
I want my girl and I want my pay.
When I'm a veteran with only one eye
I shall do nothing but look at the sky.

The Wall itself is too familiar to need much detail. It runs c. 73 miles (117km) from Wallsend (mouth of Tyne) to Bowness (Firth of Solway). Stone, with double ditches and palisade, with mile-castles, turrets, and forts. We call it Hadrian's but first Latin name seems to be *Vallum Ælianum*. Second word is another of the emperor's names. *Vallum* is suggestive, connoting a turf palisade – see R Tomlin, *Britannia* 35 (2004), 344-5.

Had the Wall not survived, its existence might have been questioned. Only extant literary mention is in Hadrian's biography (ch11 para2), first in the notoriously unreliable *Augustan History* (unknown author and date): "Hadrian set out for Britain and was the first to construct a wall, 80 miles long, designed to separate the Romans from the barbarians."

Notice the laconic nature of this sentence: no mural details, no expansive praise of its builder, except dubbing him 'the first'. The Romans did not otherwise go in for frontier walls, and the three in Romania once attributed to Hadrian's predecessor Trajan are now known to be much later constructions.

Modern debating over its purpose is needless. Obviously a defence wall. Various sources mention tribal incursions from the north. As Goldsworthy observes, "Hadrian's Wall could not stop a crossing, but would slow it down, and was a barrier to unauthorized crossing" – again invoking Trump and Mexico. Goldsworthy surprisingly ignores an age-old issue: was Hadrian influenced by the Great Wall of China? The notion is ridiculed by DB Campbell, 'A Chinese Puzzle for the Romans,' *Historia* 38 (1989), 371-6, with the acid remark: "The complete absence of direct evidence has never been a deterrent." An extremist position. The Romans had been trading for 200 years or more with the Chinese, whom they dubbed 'The Silk People'. Chinese Annals record a visit in AD 166 by dignitaries from 'The court of Antun' (= Marcus Aurelius). Not beyond the bounds of possibility that at least one Roman could have mentioned his Wall impressions to Hadrian.

Another question, this one never raised, is: why is Hadrian's Wall situated so far south of Agricola's Caledonian conquest back in the first century? A tacit admission of its ephemerality and significant tribal comeback? Whatever the reason, Hadrian's immediate successor, Antoninus Pius, was quick to extend the frontier further north by constructing the turf wall named after him between the Firths of Clyde and Forth, roughly 40 miles (64km), linking Edinburgh and Glasgow. Both the *Augustan History* and contemporary Greek travel writer Pausanias say Antoninus's wall was a response to barbarian attacks, specifically the Brigantes, a tribe centred on Yorkshire but extending over Lancashire and the North-East. Though briefly re-occupied more than once, the Antonine Wall had a short innings. By the early third century, the Romans had withdrawn to Hadrian's Wall. Later chroniclers such as Bede and Gildas frequently mixed up the two, sometimes even crediting the Britons with building them.

This may be the moment to introduce the general Carausius, who c. AD 287 declared himself emperor in Britain and proclaimed an *imperium Britannarium* – the original Brexitus.

All in all, Britain eventually tied up 35,000 legionaries, more than almost every other province. Much earlier, Greek geographer-historian Strabo had declared (post-Julius Cæsar's invasions) Britain was not worth conquering, military costs exceeding tax and other revenues. Cicero (*Letters to Atticus*, bk4 no.17) mock-lamented, "No booty, except slaves, and I doubt we'll find any scribes or musicians among them." Around Hadrian's time, Juvenal remarked on the island's reputation for glib lawyers – nothing's changed there.

In recent years, Vindolanda (near Bardon Hill, Northumberland, known since antiquarian William Camden in 1586) has become the go-to place because of the 1,300 (and still counting) wooden tablets found there – earliest examples of Roman inked wood – illustrating military and civilian life on the Wall, almost a Roman prefiguring of Kipling's *Puck*. Two tablets stand out in all discussions. One is a birthday party invitation sent by Claudia Severa to her friend Sulpicia Lepidina – the earliest surviving specimen of a female-written document. The other is a seemingly contemptuous reference by a Roman officer to the *Brittunculi* (Little Brits), "who do not mount to throw javelins" – cf. AA Barrett, *Britannia* 29 (1998), 299-306.

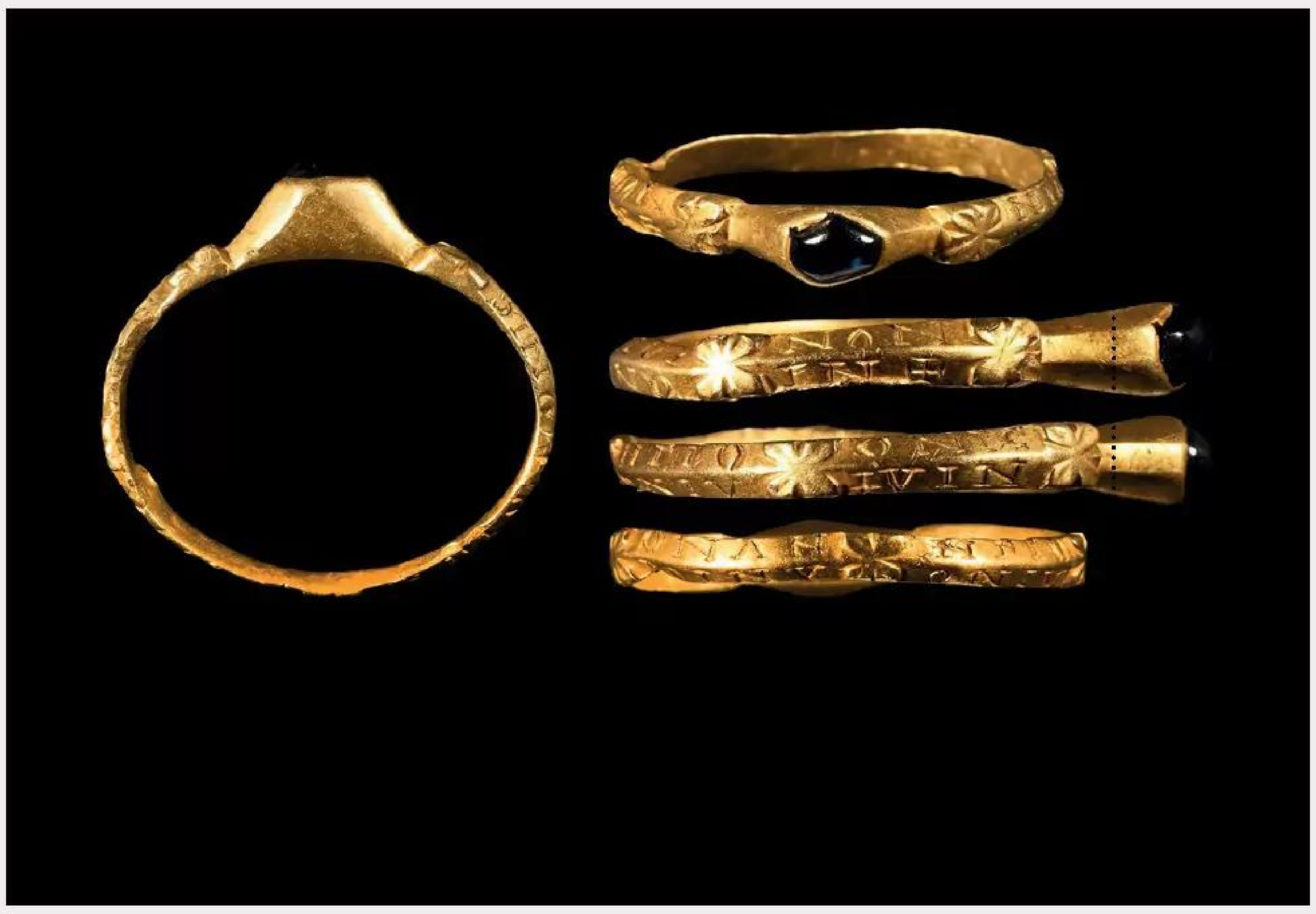
That may have been so, but it overlooks the good run Boudicca/Boadicea – compared by Antonia Fraser (*Warrior Queens*, 1988) to Mrs Thatcher in Argentinian pomp – gave the Romans back in the first century.

Goldsworthy may have the last words: "Little of the Roman empire's legacy was left in Britain. It survived only in place names like -chester and -caster (=camp). It was only in later centuries that antiquarians began to unravel the story of Hadrian's Wall – a task that is still not complete."

ARCHÆOLOGY

A MONTHLY EXCAVATION OF ODDITIES AND ANTIQUITIES

PAUL SIEVEKING unearths a trio of remarakable rings, a 1,000-year-old Belgian brain and more



LEFT: The Drayton ring with its mysterious inscription. **BELOW LEFT**: George Grenville's ring, found by a detectorist. **BELOW**: The Pictish ring unearthed in Moray. **BOTTOM LEFT**: The Celtic 'fertility figure' discovered in Cambridgeshire.

WENYING LI

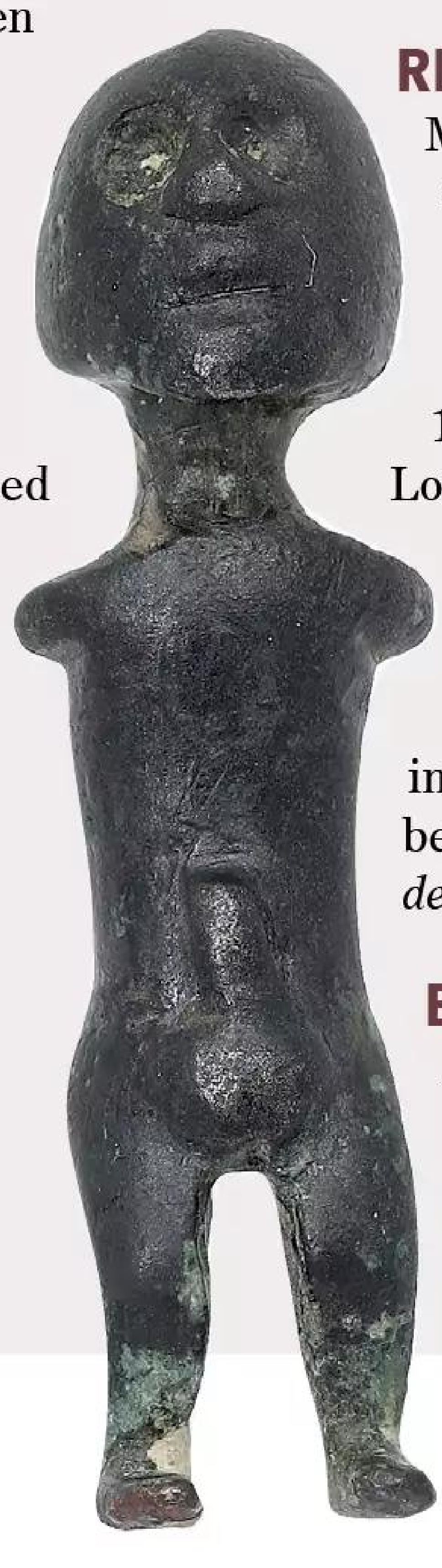
FERTILITY FIGURE

Bob Jemmett, 75, was taking part in a metal detecting rally at Great Chishill, Cambridgeshire, in September 2018 when, 4in (10cm) down in a ploughed field, he discovered a first century BC bronze Celtic 'fertility figure' with oversized genitals, which he nicknamed 'Nobby'. It measured 37mm x 10mm (1.45in x 0.39in). An image of the figure was published on the Portable Antiquities website and was subsequently used as a logo by the rally organisers in their promotions. As a result, detectorists from all over Europe at rallies would ask Mr Jemmett if they could see Nobby, which he kept in his pocket as a constant companion.

Nigel Mills, of Noonans' auctioneers, which sold the figure in June 2024 for £3,000, said: "This unique figure has an oversized bald head with deep sockets for eyes, wedges for arms and short legs." He said such figures might "have had symbolic powers of good luck and warding off evil spirits". It is reminiscent of the Cerne Abbas Giant carved inro a Dorset hillside, which is now thought to date from the Anglo-Saxon period. *BBC News, 15+21 June 2024.*

PICTISH RING

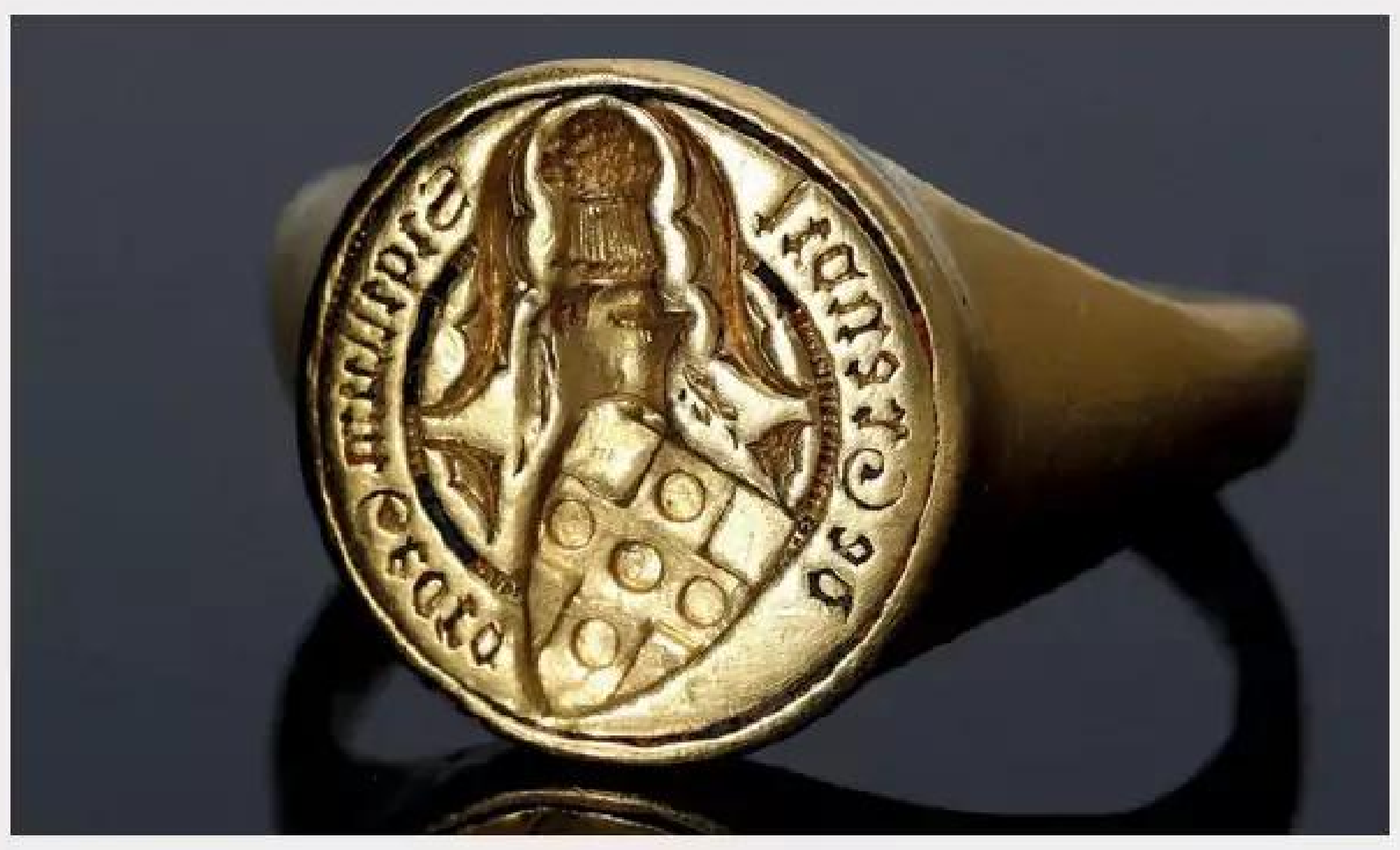
A "remarkable" Pictish ring has been discovered by an archæological volunteer at the site of a fort in Burghead, Moray, north-east Scotland. It is thought the settlement was a significant seat of power within the Pictish kingdom between AD 500 and AD 1000. Gordon Noble, Professor of Archæology at Aberdeen University, who led the excavation, said: "There are very few Pictish rings which have ever been discovered and those we do know about usually come from hoards which were placed in the ground deliberately for safekeeping in some way." *BBC News, 4 Sept 2024.*



NOONANS

PM'S RING FOUND

A gold signet ring that belonged to George Grenville, who was UK Prime Minister between 1763 and 1765, was sold in June 2024 by Mayfair auctioneer Noonans for £9,500 to a buyer in the USA. It had been discovered in a pasture for sheep near Aylesbury, Buckinghamshire, by 85-year-old metal detectorist Tom Clark. Grenville was dismissed by George III after the Acts he introduced caused protests in what were then the American colonies. His ring was passed to his second son, also a member of Parliament, named George. He served as Lord Lieutenant of Ireland, was given the title of Marquess of Buckingham and lived close to where the ring was found. *BBC News, 13 June 2024.*



PAUL DEVEREUX

RING ENIGMA

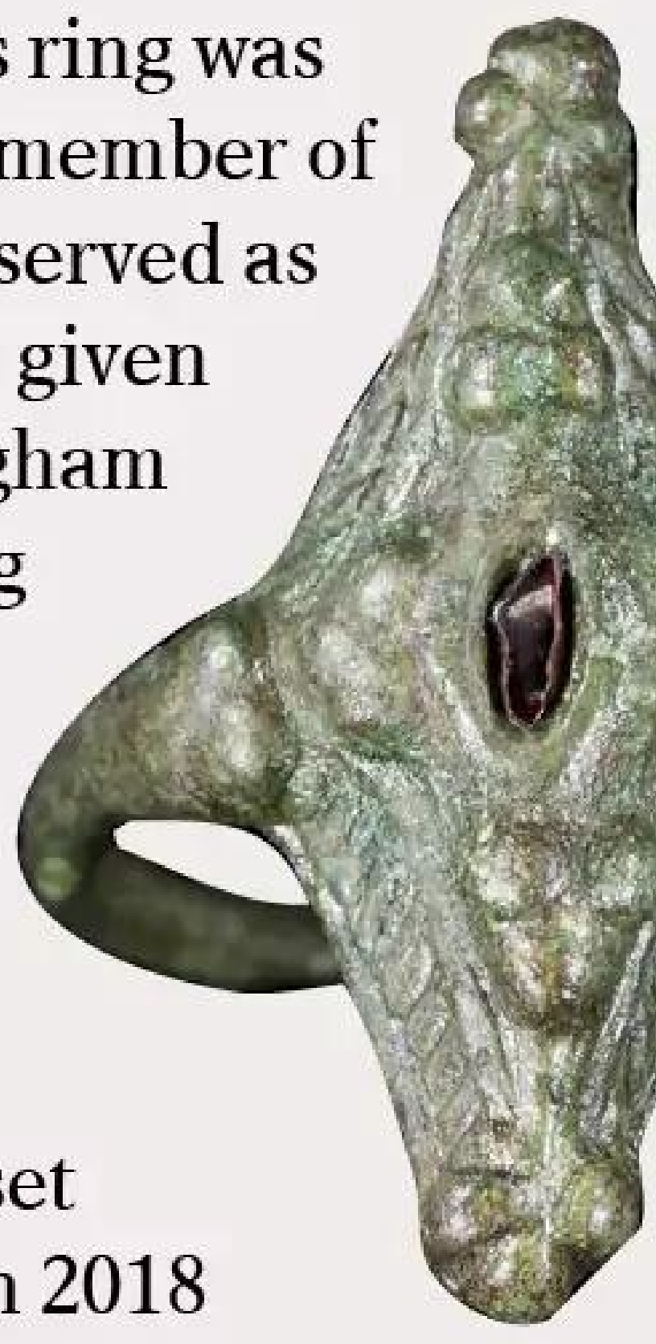
Mystery surrounds a stirrup-shaped gold ring set with a sapphire, dug up in 2018 in Drayton, Oxfordshire, by a metal detectorist. Dating from the 12th or 13th century, it is inscribed in Lombardic script: "+ NI ONAN NRIO ONIC/ NIAI AINO NAN". Could this be a magical incantation, or is it meaningless? (Some engravers were illiterate but knew clients wanted an inscription.) The mystery might never be solved. *Sunday Telegraph, 12 May; detectingfinds.co.uk, 17 May 2024.*

BRAIN PRESERVATION

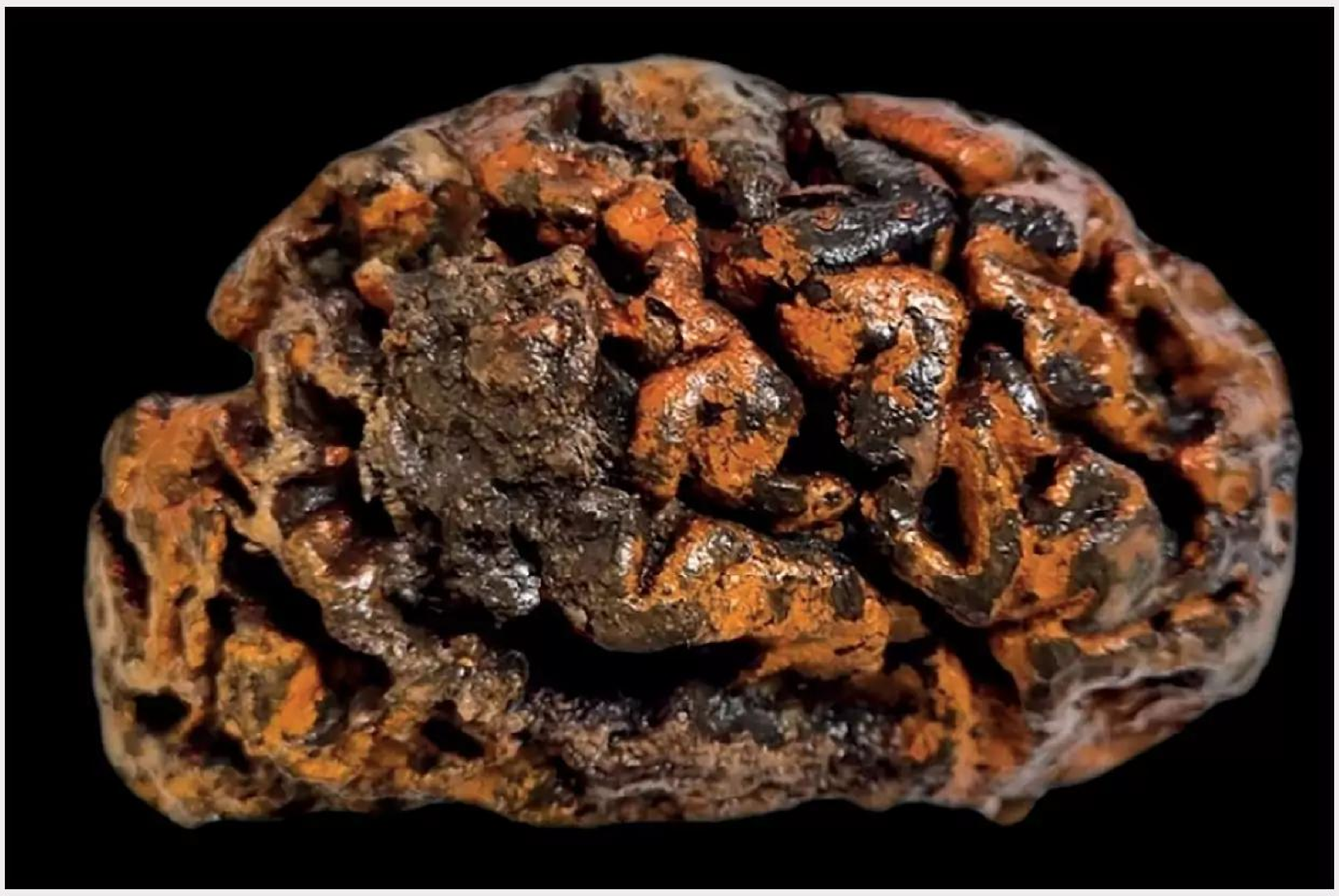
A study of human brains that have been naturally preserved for hundreds or thousands of years has identified 1,300 cases where the organs have survived even when all other soft tissues have decomposed. Some of these brains are more than 12,000 years old. "Brains of this type, where they're the only soft tissue preserved, have been found in sunken shipwrecks and in waterlogged graves where the bones are just floating," says Alexandra Morton-Hayward at the University of Oxford. "It's really, really strange. We're not expecting a brain to preserve in any type of environment, to be honest. If, as an archæologist, I dig up a grave and I find a brain rattling around in a skull, I would be shocked. But particularly, we're not expecting soft tissues to preserve in waterlogged environments."

Morton-Hayward first became interested in brain preservation while working as an undertaker. "The brain is known to be one of the first organs to decompose post-mortem. I saw it liquefy pretty quickly. But I also saw it preserve," she says. Many researchers have noted that human brains are found preserved more often than expected and in surprising circumstances. Now, Morton-Hayward and her colleagues have put together a database of more than 4,400 preserved human brains found all over the world and have also collected and studied many preserved brains themselves. "I did put one in an MRI machine, which was a terrible mistake. I didn't realise how much iron was in there," says Morton-Hayward. In most cases, the brain preservation could be explained by known processes. For instance, the brains of Incan human sacrifices entombed on top of a volcano in South America around AD 1450 were freeze-dried along with the bodies.

The bodies and brains of bog people such as Tollund Man, who was hanged and dumped in a bog 2,400 years ago in what is now Denmark, were preserved by a tanning process similar to that used for leather. And saponification, where fatty substances turn into a form of soap called grave wax, preserved the brains of some people shot in 1936 during the Spanish Civil War and buried in a mass grave. But the known processes preserve all soft tissues,



UNIVERSITY OF ABERDEEN



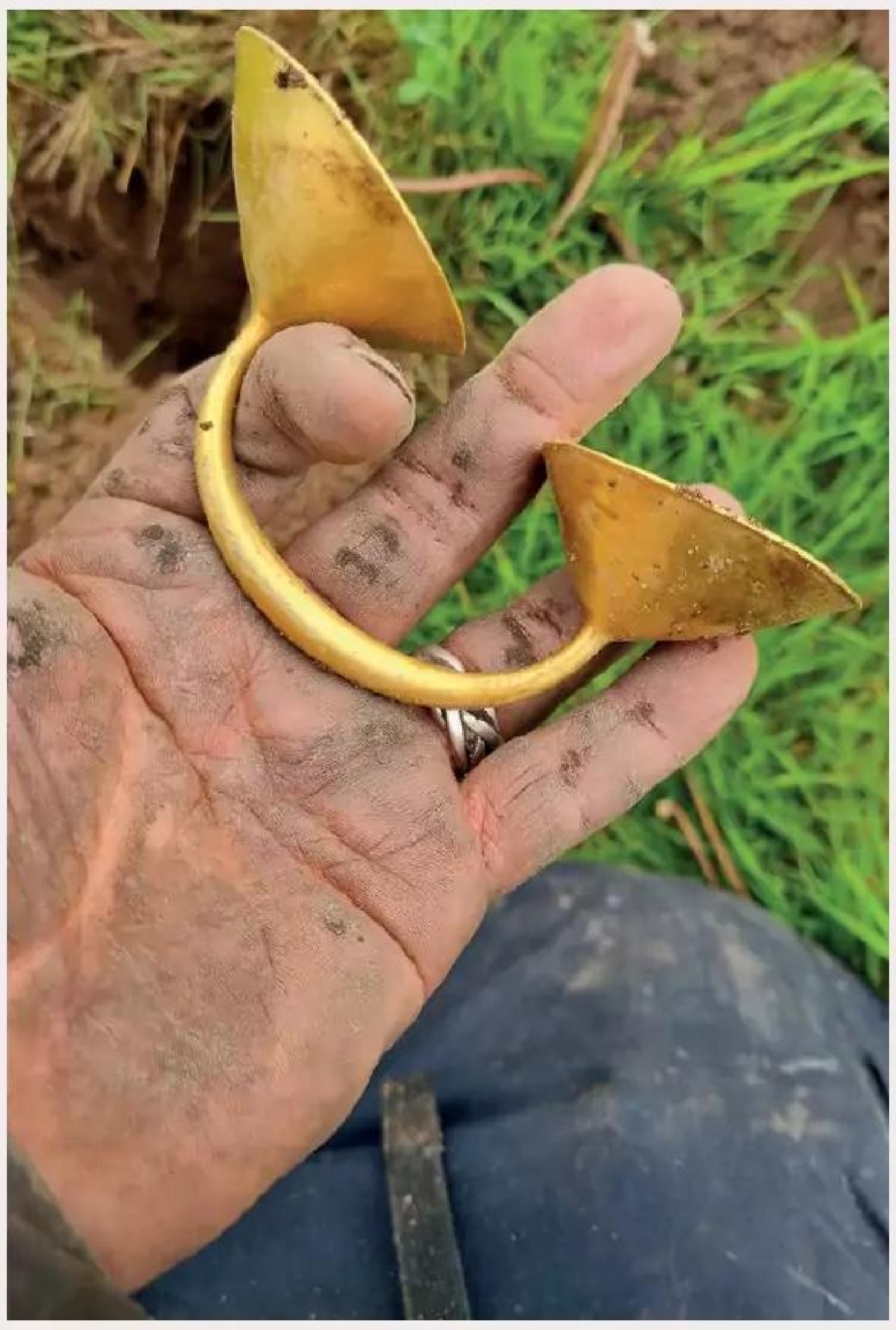
ALEXANDRA MORTON-HAYWARD

ABOVE: 1,000-year-old brain of an individual excavated from a churchyard in Ypres, Belgium. The folds of the tissue, which are still soft and wet, are stained orange with iron oxides. **BELOW**: The rare Bronze Age dress or cloak fastener found by metal detectorist Jonathan Needham in Staffordshire

not just brains. They don't explain the 1,300 cases where brains are the only soft tissue to survive. "This unknown mechanism is completely different," says Morton-Hayward. "The key feature of it is that we only have the brain and the bones left. There's no skin, no muscle, no gut." For instance, Saint Hedwig of Silesia was buried in Poland in 1243. When her body was exhumed in the 17th century, her brain was found to be preserved, which at the time was attributed to divine power.

Morton-Hayward's working hypothesis is that, in certain circumstances, substances such as iron can catalyse the formation of cross-links between proteins and lipids, forming more stable molecules that resist degradation. The nature of the proteins and lipids found in brains, or their ratio, might be the key. "The mechanisms are similar to those that we see in neurodegenerative diseases, like dementia," she says. "So if we can figure out what's happening to brains after death, we might be able to shed some light on what's happening in brain ageing in life as well."

It is fantastic news that the data is being published," says Brittany Moller at James Cook University in Melbourne, Australia, one of the researchers who has found that brain preservation is more common than thought. "It may increase awareness among researchers of the likely potential for brain material preservation," she says. That is important because preserved brains often have the same colour as surrounding soil. "It is therefore highly likely that brain material is frequently discarded during archæological excavation as it is not recognised for what it is," says Moller. While the study focused on human brains, the findings should apply to animals too. There are at least 700 instances of animal brains preserved in fossils, says Morton-Hayward, with the oldest being arthropods that are half a billion years old. *newscientist.com, 20 Mar 2024.*



JONATHAN NEEDHAM / SWNS

DRESS FASTENER

Detectorist Jonathan Needham unearthed a 3,000-year-old gold dress or cloak fastener at Ellastone, in Staffordshire. It is believed to be one of only seven such Bronze Age artefacts found in England. Meghan King, finds liaison officer for Derbyshire and Nottinghamshire, said she believed the fastener came from Ireland. "We think it was probably worn by an important person as its really well-crafted and it's a beautiful piece." *BBC News, 31 Jan 2024.*

HORSE BEHEADINGS

Around 1,000 years ago, pagans living near the Baltic Sea imported horses from their newly Christian northern neighbours and then subjected the animals to gruesome public sacrifice. Horses were an important component of Balt culture between the first and 13th centuries; numerous ancient equestrian artefacts have been recovered, and travellers have reported that elite Balts drank fermented mare's milk. Because the Balts were not literate prior to their conversion to Christianity, however, most information about their lives, including their pagan religion, comes from archæological investigation. In a new study published in May 2024 in the journal *Science Advances*, researchers detailed their biomolecular analysis of 80 sacrificed horses from nine archæological sites in the eastern Baltic region – modern-day Poland, Lithuania and the Russian province of Kaliningrad sandwiched between them – and determined that both male and female horses were chosen for sacrifice and that some horses were imported from quite a distance.

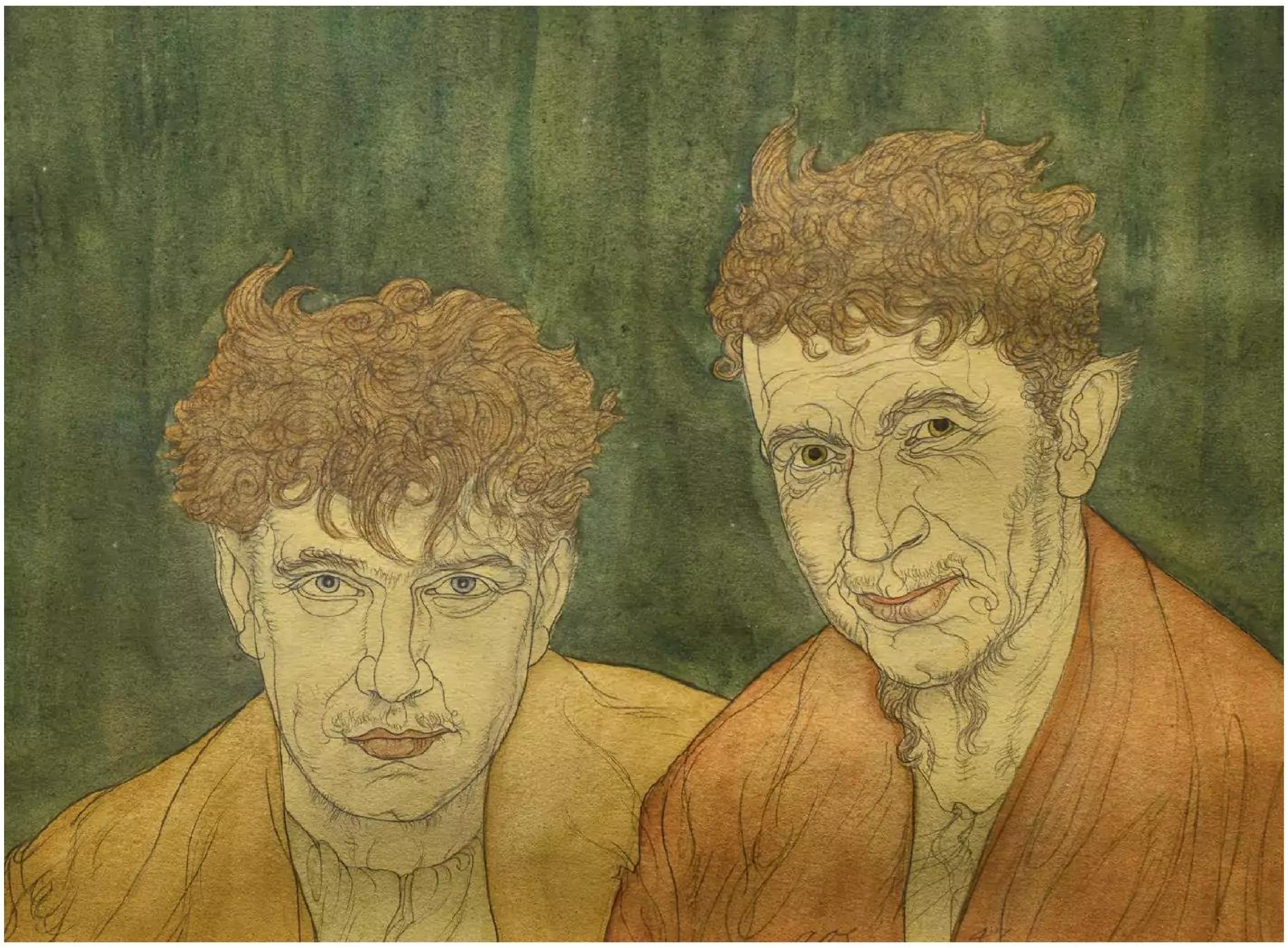
A previous assumption within Baltic archæology was that stallions were specifically selected for public sacrifice and that this ritual – which often involved decapitation, flaying, quartering the horses or burying them alive – was enacted at the funerals of elite male warriors in Balt culture. To test this, the team analysed the DNA of the horses and found that roughly 66% were stallions and 34% were mares, suggesting that the Balts were not exclusively selecting male horses for this ritual, as previously thought. Because horses were common in the Balts' territory, researchers did not previously question whether the animals were sourced locally or from somewhere else; but a strontium isotope analysis of the horses' tooth enamel found that three were not born locally. Results confirm that there is no possibility that the horses originated in the territory of the Baltic tribes and that the region of the highest likelihood for these horses is the Fennoscandian Peninsula, specifically east-central Sweden or southern Finland.

All three horses were carbon-dated to about the 11th to 13th centuries, a time when trade networks across the Baltic Sea, particularly with Sweden, were well established. It was also a period when there was still pagan resistance within the kingdom of Sweden, which officially converted to Christianity in 1164. The fact that one nonlocal horse in Kaliningrad was buried with a Scandinavian-influenced artefact – a weight, possibly involved in trading – may suggest that its Balt owner was a pagan trader. But it is also possible that the imported horses arrived with their Scandinavian owners, who were buried in the Baltic style. "In either case," the researchers wrote, "our results prove that horses were crossing the Baltic Sea on ships, a level of mobility not previously recognised archæologically." *livescience.com, 17 May 2024.*

EXHIBITION REPORT

FOUR WITCHES AND A WARLOCK

A rare opportunity to view a collection of lesser works by five important occult-inclined artists at the east London *wunderkammer* of Viktor Wynd. **DAVID V BARRETT** knocks back some absinthe and braves the gloom...



LEFT: *Faun and Satyr* by Austin Osman Spare. **BELOW LEFT**: The (Austin Osman) Spare Room at the exhibition.

In the dim light of the cluttered surreality of the Viktor Wynd Museum of Curiosities near Bethnal Green, London, with the subtle scent of absinthe rising to the low ceiling from our shot glasses, the unusual display of artwork on the walls seems very much at home. 'Four Witches & a Warlock' is an exhibition of sketches and finished artwork by five of the 20th century's most significant esoteric artists: Rosaleen Norton, Madge Gill, Austin Osman Spare, Ithell Colquhoun and Leonora Carrington. The title is perhaps a little over the top; only Norton, the self-styled 'Witch of Kings Cross' in Sydney, Australia, could really be called a witch, though Ithell Colquhoun was a serious occultist and Spare created significant magical systems, notably his use of sigils – but was he really a warlock? Still, it's a catchy title.

> *Only Norton, the self-styled 'Witch of King's Cross', could really be called a witch*

- The artwork of Rosaleen (Roie) Norton (1917-1979) is overtly sexual and Pagan; her display includes press cuttings about her clashes with the Australian authorities over obscenity (see **FT224:48-54; 405:66**).

- Born in east London, Madge Gill (1882-1961) produced a vast amount of work, often with complex geometric designs executed with pen and ink; it was all mediumistic in origin, coming through her personal spirit guide, Myrninerest (see **FT401:45**).

- Living in poverty in south London – he sometimes dashed off a drawing in exchange for a pub meal – Austin Osman Spare (1886-1956) was a skilled portraitist as well as an esoteric artist; he has been called "Britain's proto-surrealist" (see **FT144:34-40**).

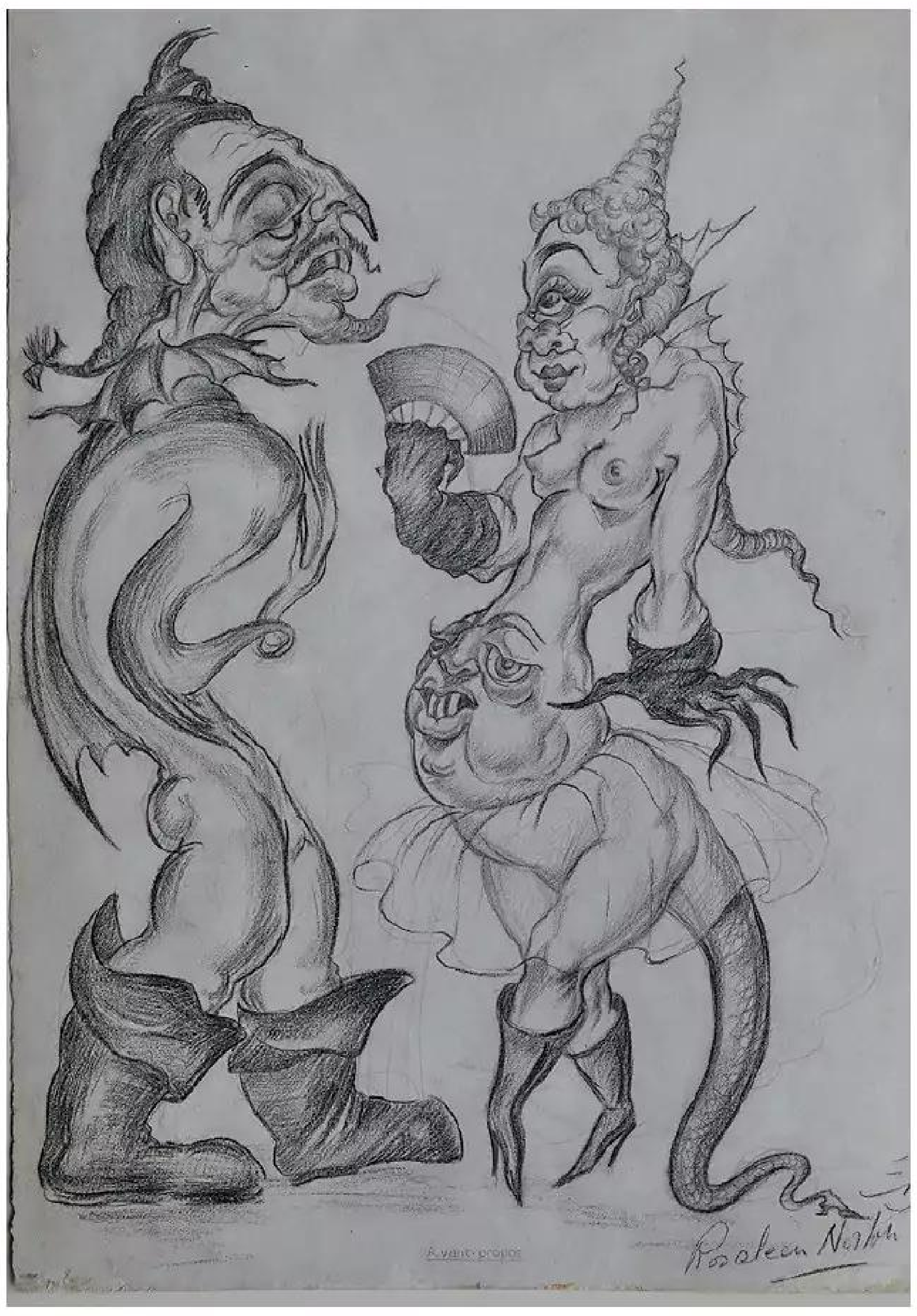
- Very much an occult surrealist, Ithell Colquhoun (1906-88) was influenced by the ideas of Robert Graves, JG Frazer, Madame Blavatsky, Annie Besant, WB Yeats and others; she was a member of Aleister Crowley's OTO and later of the Fellowship of Isis. Tate Britain is staging a major exhibition of her work next year (see **FT401:44**).

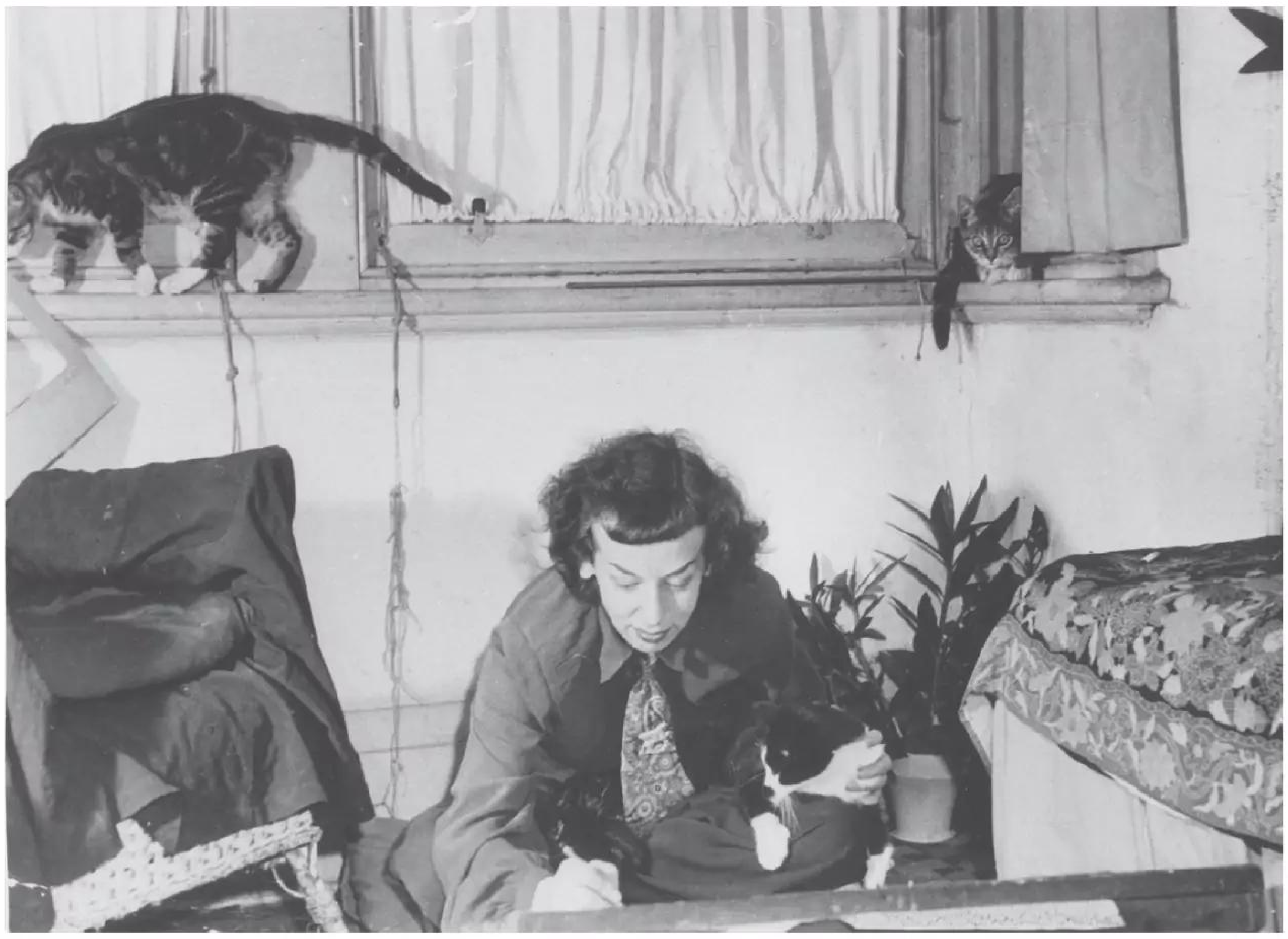
- Leonora Carrington (1917-2011) was in a relationship with Max Ernst when she was 20 and he was more than twice her age and married. The exhibition includes notebook drawings from when her wealthy family had her confined to an asylum in Spain in 1940. She spent most of her long life in Mexico, and pursued a mystical surrealism often involving animals, especially horses (see **FT419:50-51, 68-70**).

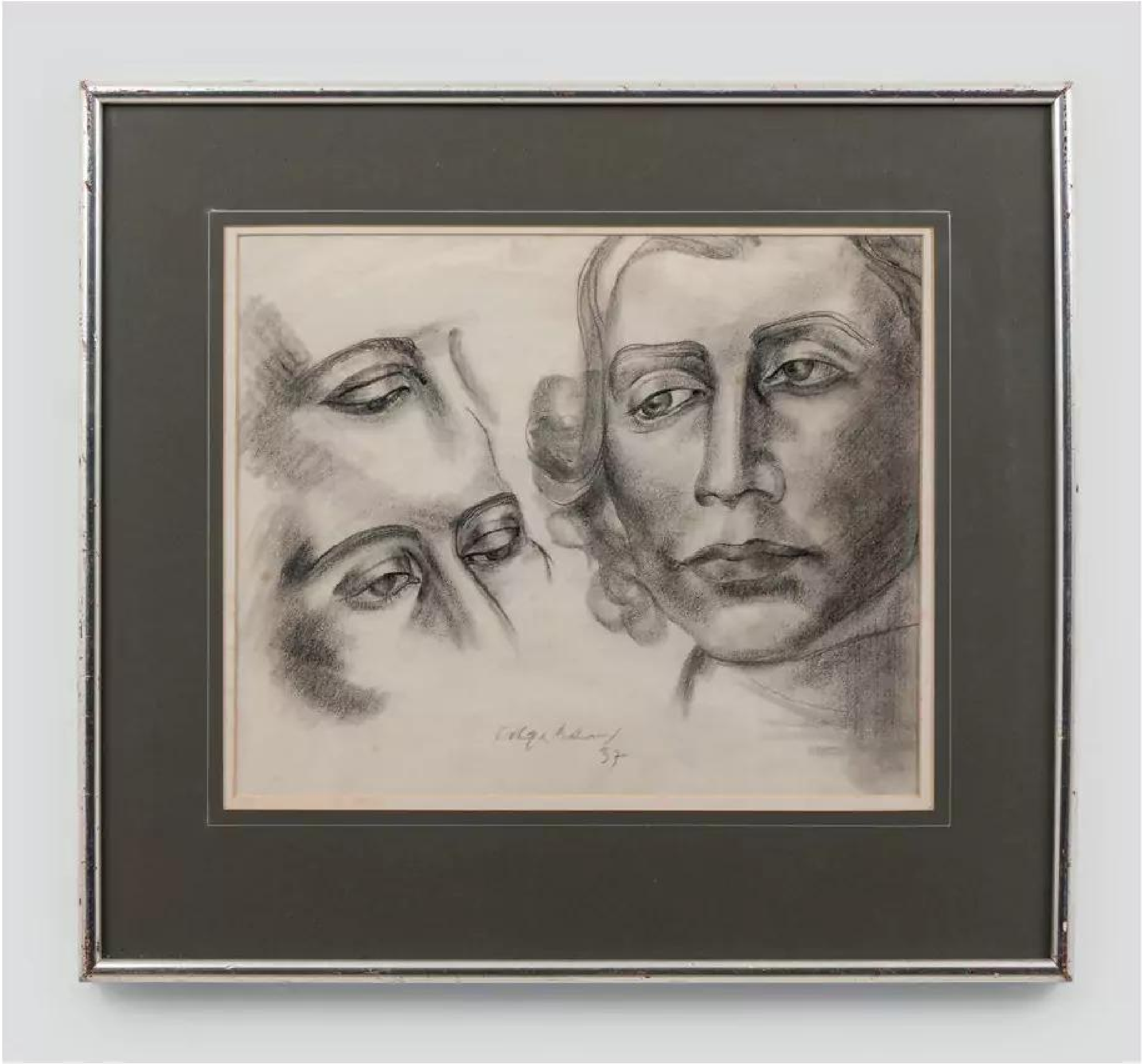
While many of the sketches in the exhibition are very much lesser works, it's still a privilege to see the creations of these five artists – all from Wynd's personal collection – brought together. My only complaint – I think a legitimate one given the importance of the artists – is that many of the artworks are difficult to see clearly in the museum's permanently crepuscular setting; although as occult means hidden, even this is strangely suitable...

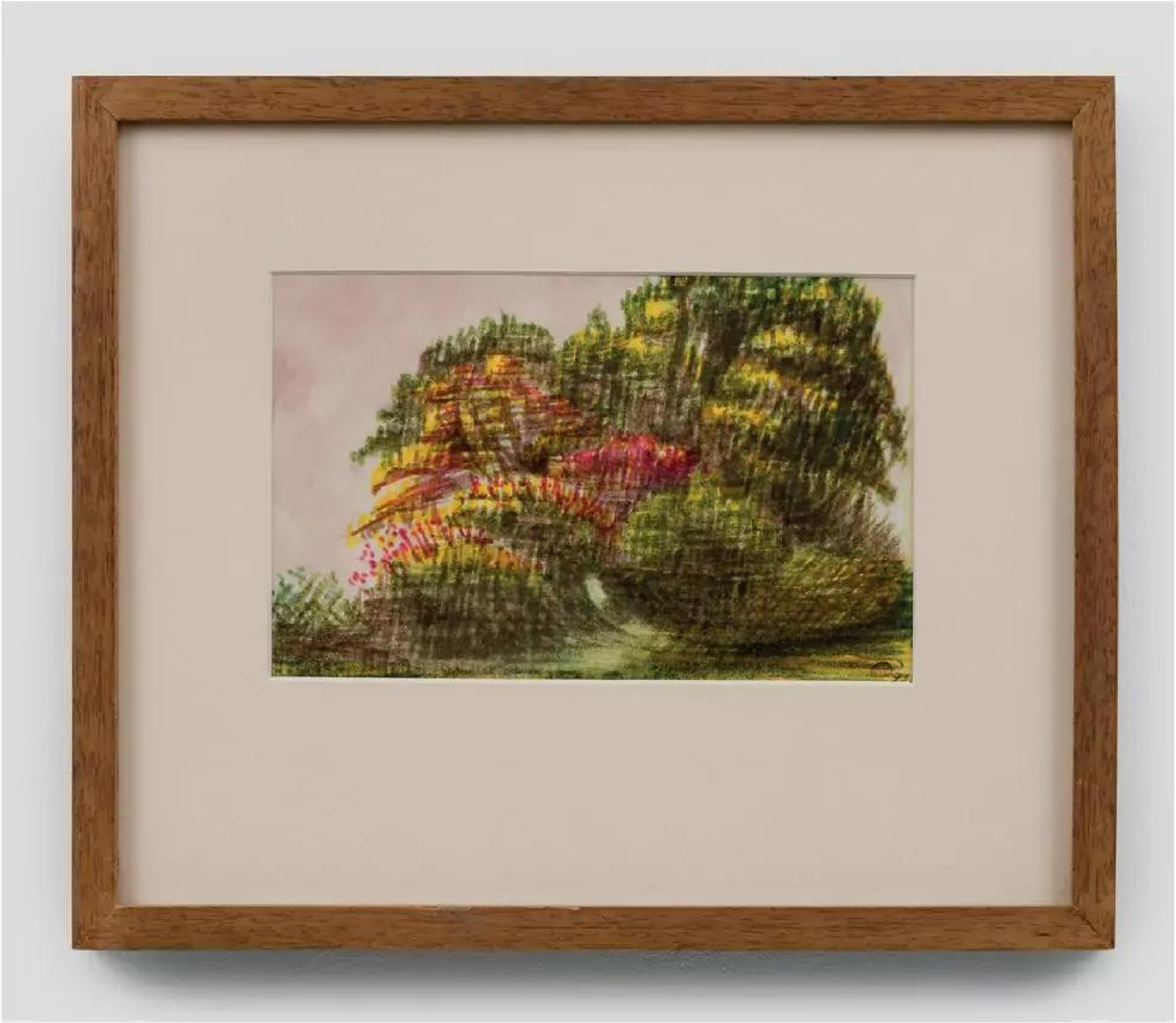
Four Witches & a Warlock is at the Viktor Wynd Museum of Curiosities, Fine Art & Unnatural History, 11 Mare Street, London E8 until March 2025.

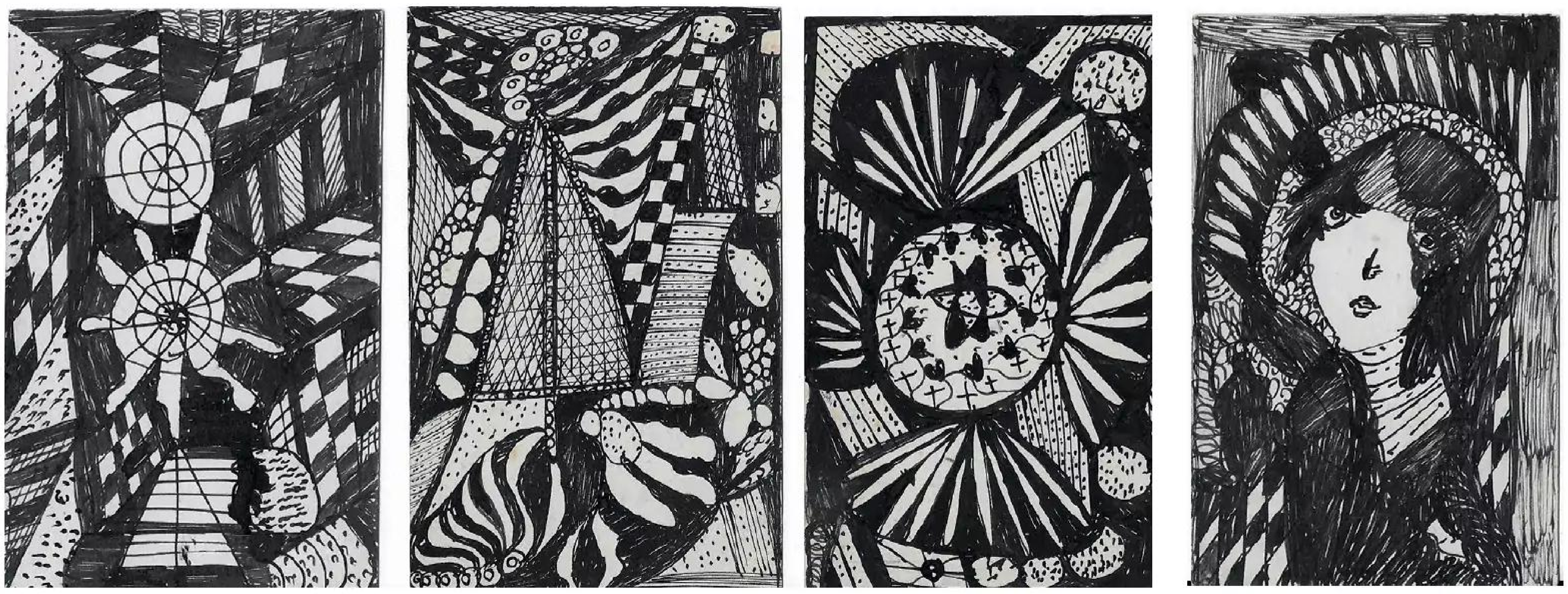
All images courtesy of The Viktor Wynd Museum of Curiosities, Fine Art & UnNatural History.







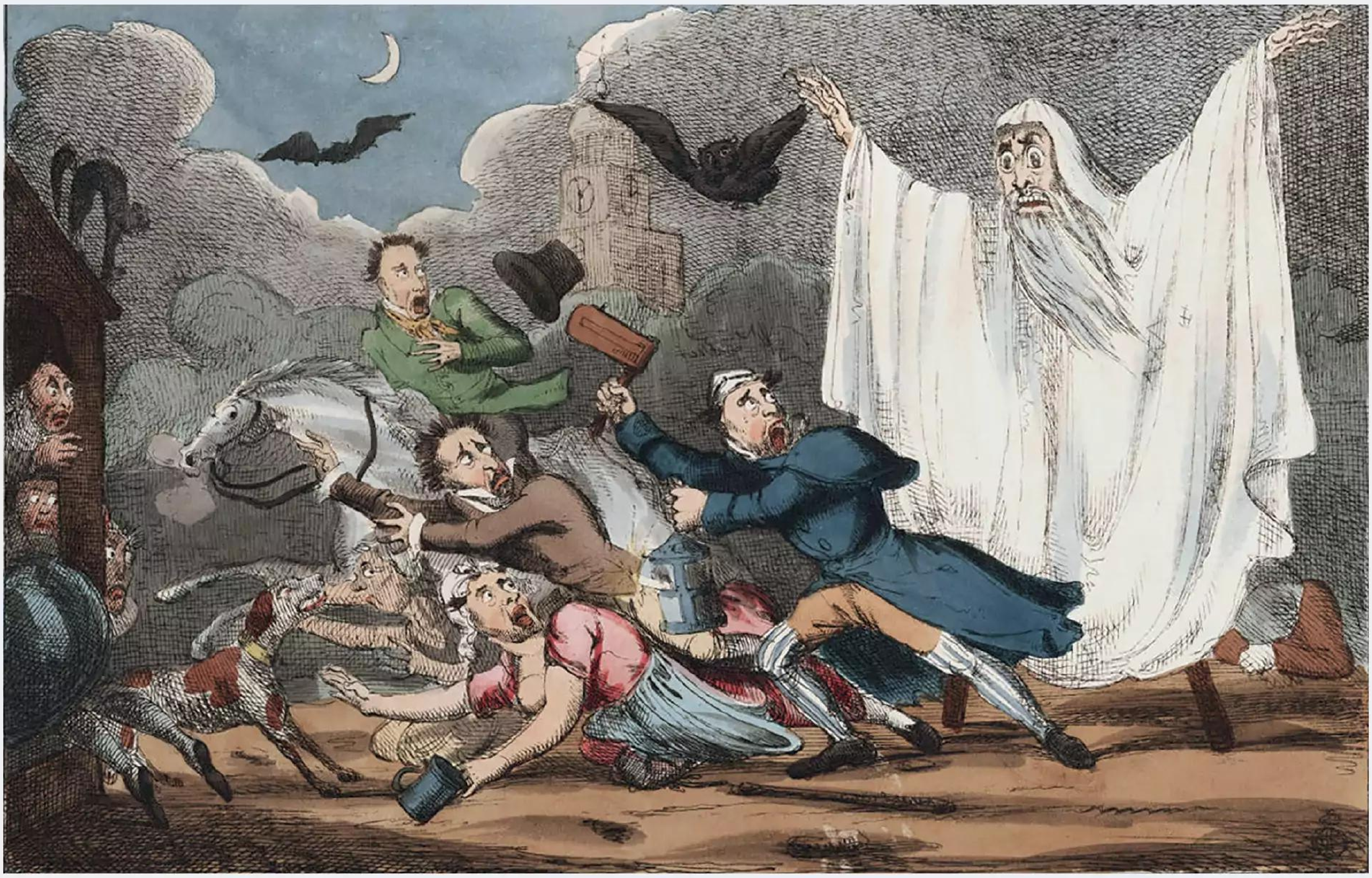




TOP LEFT: Rosaleen Norton, *Avant-Propos*, c. 1940s. **TOP RIGHT**: Norton at work, drawing cats. **ABOVE LEFT**: Ithell Colquhoun, *Portrait Study of Lucy Conford*, 1937. **ABOVE RIGHT**: Ithell Colquhoun, *Autumnal Grove*, c. 1973. **LEFT**: Three pen and ink spirit drawings and a self portrait, c. 1940s, by Madge Gill.

Ghost season

ALAN MURDIE begins a festive two-part survey of Christmas hauntings in fact and fiction



ABOVE: A contemporary cartoon showing the Hammersmith Ghost scare of 1803-1804.

Along with Hallowe'en the Christmas period is one of the two great seasonal times for ghosts in the Northern Hemisphere. Autumn and winter were long associated in the cultures of ancient Europe with both customary feasting and belief in the return of the dead. Amid the merriment, every generation produces and shares fresh stories of how the dead keep coming back at mid-winter, belief further sustained by a vigorous British literary tradition of fictional tales meeting the annual demands for supernatural thrills.

A case can be made that real experiences of phantoms may peak during the darkest months of the year. Many reasons can be advanced for this. Depending on one's pre-existing perspective, the case for ghosts being more active can be made on psychological, cultural, psychical and spiritual grounds. Personally, I even wonder if there is a physiological component whereby our bodies and brains may become more attuned and receptive to the psychic realm in periods of prolonged darkness, especially if the mind is relaxed.

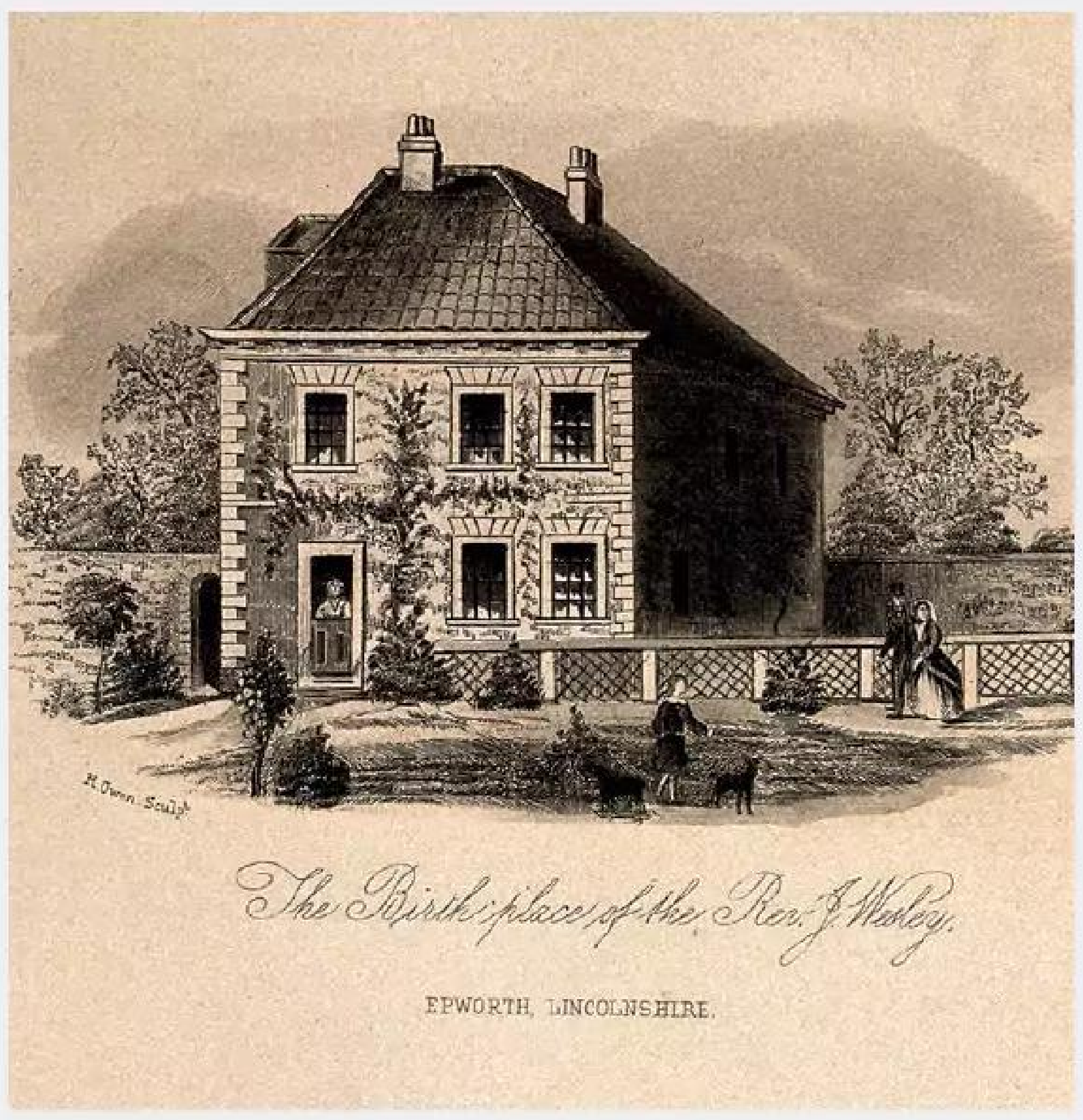
What can certainly be said with certitude is that many of the most famous ghosts and hauntings of the last few centuries occurred against the backdrop of the Christmas season, proving apparitions remain on duty through the holidays and may even ramp up manifestations.

On 19 January 1643, the lawyer John Greene of Lincoln's Inn, London, recorded in his diary: "There are now divers reports of strange sights seen, and strange noises heard at Edgehill where our last battle was fought; in the place where the King's army stood terrible outcries, where the Parliaments [stood] music and singing Psalms".

Widely circulating was a story that on Christmas Eve night 1642 numerous spectres materialised in the air over Edgehill, Warwickshire, the scene of the Battle of Edgehill just two months earlier on the 23 October (see **FT210:42-45**). Between midnight and one in the morning, shepherds and country people heard sounds of drums and the groans of dying men. Alarmed by these sounds, the hearers were about to flee the scene when a host of apparitional soldiers and horses appeared above them, accompanied by sounds of cannons and guns firing and further terrible groans. This spectacle repeated itself on subsequent nights, all set down in a contemporary pamphlet *The New Yeare's Wonder*. Allegedly, deceased officers from the King's army were seen and identified among the aerial phantoms, implying men loyal to the Crown were already on their way to Heaven and God favoured their side. Such phantom pageantry was often rated as carrying a prophetic significance, and the ghosts of Edgehill continue to be cited today, featuring in many modern ghost books, notwithstanding that more discerning analysis holds them likely to have been invented as a piece of Royalist propaganda. (See "Edgehill and Souter Fell: A Critical Examination of Two English Phantom Army cases" by Peter A McCue and Alan Gauld in the *SPR Journal*, vol. 69, No. 879, 2005.)

Going forward to the 18th century, the Christmas season 1716-1717 proved one that the family of the Revd. Samuel Wesley at Epworth Rectory in Lincolnshire never forgot. Their rectory was a new property, a Queen Anne House constructed just eight years earlier in 1709, home to the minister, his wife, a large family of sons and daughters and a number of servants. For over a month between 1 December 1716 through to January 1717, everyone was troubled on an almost daily basis by an outbreak of inexplicable knocking sounds and extraordinary noises and apparitions. The opening salvo (rather like the beginning of the phenomenon at Edgehill) came with a series of "several dismal groans" heard by a chambermaid standing in the doorway of the dining room. The sounds were like those of someone in the process of dying. Initially the family laughed off the noises, but inexplicable knockings soon followed, usually delivered in a sequence of three or four at a time, nightly for the next two weeks. The knocks were audible all over the house, but seemed concentrated on the children's nursery, known as the green chamber. (Over 150 years later Calvados Castle in Normandy would also have a haunted green room and blue room.) Revd Wesley believed a practical joker must be tormenting his family before drastically revising his opinion after knocks erupted directly by his bedside. He immediately rose and conducted a search, but found nothing. This convinced him a supernatural presence was on the loose. Today, the Epworth haunting is frequently classified as a poltergeist outbreak, yet there is no mention of one of the most characteristic poltergeist effects, that of object movements, other than the unexplained lifting of door latches and doors opening and closing by themselves (see **FT273:74, 378:34, 416:44**).

One evening around 10pm, a collection of strange sounds announced the arrival of the entity. Footsteps of people walking around upstairs rooms and then running down the stairs were heard, followed by what was likened to the rattling of coins in a bag, the clatter of numerous bottles dashed to the floor and a sound "like the winding up of a jack". Samuel later compared this sound to "the turning of a windmill when the wind changes", indicating an acute and concentrated degree of attention on his part. Apparitions scared some of the children, including one of a man in a loose nightgown trailing after him and an animal resembling a white rabbit glimpsed scampering through the kitchen.


The Birth-place of the Rev. J. Wesley.
EPWORTH, LINCOLNSHIRE.

LEFT: Epworth Rectory, where the Wesley family were plagued by a poltergeist over the Christmas of 1716.

Apparitions scared some of the children, including one of a man in a loose nightgown trailing after him

Two days before Christmas, Samuel heard six knocks, while his wife and daughter Emilia heard knocking on the bedsteads and then under the nursery beds. Emilia knocked back and received a knock in answer. Modern Spiritualism might have started here, but Mrs Wesley then peered under the bed, seeing a strange shape, perhaps like a badger, running underneath. By this time, Samuel recorded "the noises are now grown customary to me" with children growing more curious rather than frightened, though two servants remained agitated. Most upset of all was the family's mastiff dog, which shook with terror.

On Christmas Day the Wesleys were granted some respite. Samuel observed when he omitted praying for the King and heir to the throne in church and at family prayers, the entity behaved itself, recording how, "when this is done there is no knocking."

This feature has led some scholars into wondering if a psychological basis underpinned disturbance, since the Wesley household was previously riven by a bitter dispute between Samuel and his wife over the legitimacy of the monarchy. Two days afterwards the Christmas ceasefire ended with a resumption of knocking when the King was again mentioned in prayers.

Mysterious noises continued into January 1717, racketing until four in the morning and depriving the household of sleep. By this time, his tether stretched to its limits, Samuel angrily addressed the entity, urging it to say why it came and referring to it as "a deaf and dumb devil". This panicked some of the Wesley girls, who became terribly afraid the entity would finally speak. Instead, there came a fusillade of violent knocks so intense upon the bedstead the girls feared it would shatter. In fact, this outburst proved its farewell performance, for after the sounds waned and ceased the ghost went silent thereafter.

Sceptics such as Trevor Hall (1910-1991) and Eric Dingwall attributed the Wesley poltergeist to fraud and chicanery by a servant or local pranksters at the time (see their 1965 book *New Light on Old Ghosts*). Given that both authors were authorities on conjuring (Dingwall was a member of the Magic Circle and Hall's doctoral thesis was on antique conjuring books), it is a shame neither proposed the likely mechanism for this legerdemain that so comprehensively hoodwinked the Wesleys.

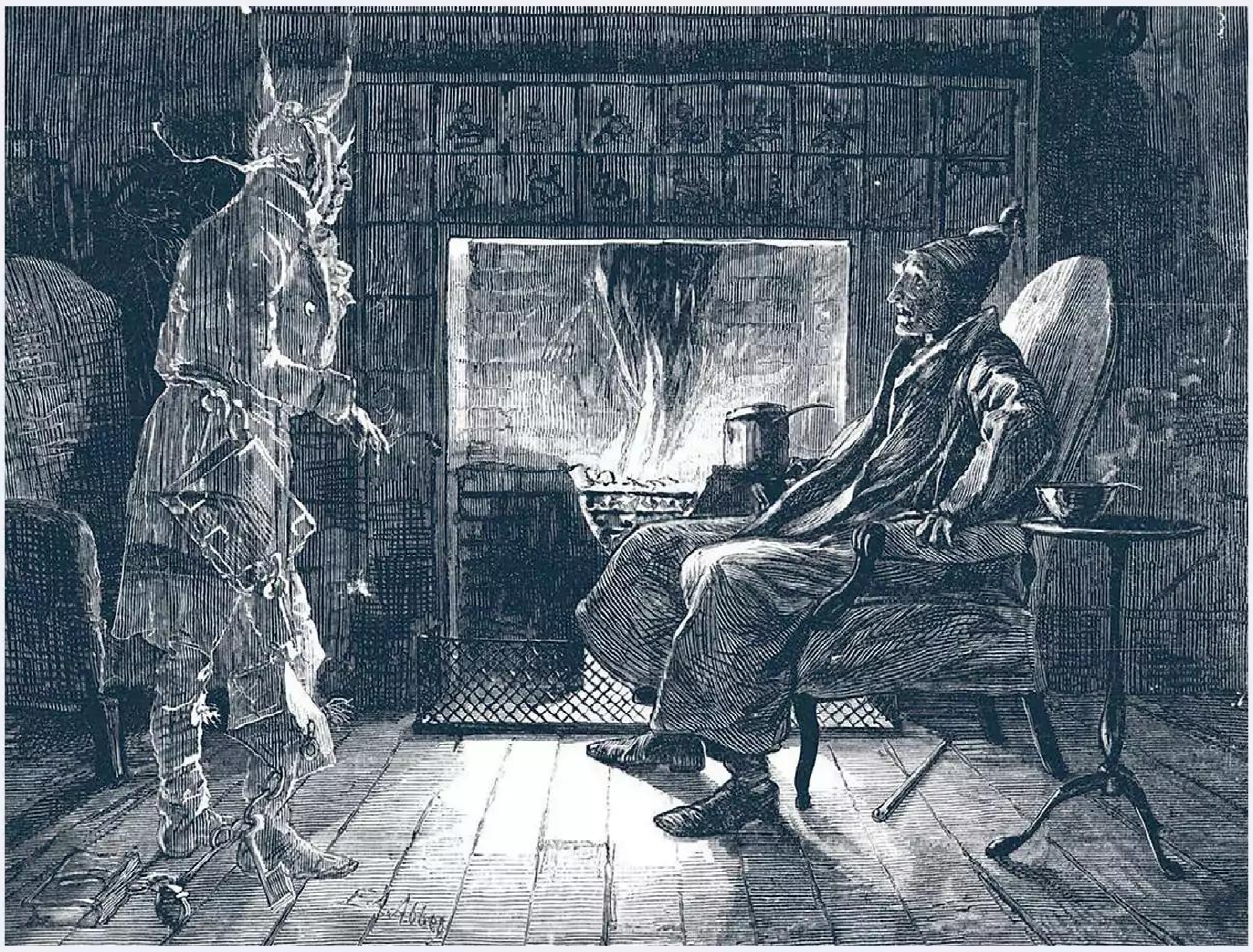
It was certainly a most influential poltergeist outbreak, since Samuel's sons John and Charles went on to found Methodism, stimulating a revival of supernaturalism in Christianity and a long-running tradition of poltergeist outbreaks in non-conformist homes (see *Poltergeists* (1940) by Sacheverell Sitwell).

Nearly 50 years later the Cock Lane Ghost started knocking in London over the winter of 1760-61. It was widely reported from January 1761, suggesting a Christmastime origin (see **FT150:30-33, 202:38-44, 335:36-41**), but the case was destined to be treated as a benchmark in popular credulity. Thereafter, the next big ghost scare occurred over the festive season of 1803-04. Reports circulated of a terrifying white-robed apparition lurking around Hammersmith churchyard with locals averring the restless spirit of a suicide buried there a year before was rising. The spectre was credited with leaping out from ill-lit corners to seize passers-by. Two people were left seriously ill from the shock occasioned by these assaults. No safety existed in numbers, since the 'Ghost' even attacked 16 passengers riding in a wagon. According to a report in *The Times*, the pregnant wife of a locksmith died from fear. The Hammersmith Ghost (see **FT296:42-45**) was never apprehended, but became of lasting legal significance when the furore culminated in an innocent man in white overalls being shot dead after being mistaken as the phantom by a trigger-happy vigilante. This homicide stimulated a long-running debate amongst lawyers over the scope of the law of self-defence not finally resolved judicially until 1984 (see 'The Hammersmith Ghost' (2003) by Alan Murdie in *Justice of the Peace* vol. 167 20 Dec; 'Legally Interesting Mysteries' by Naomi Ryan in *Counsel* magazine Oct 2022).

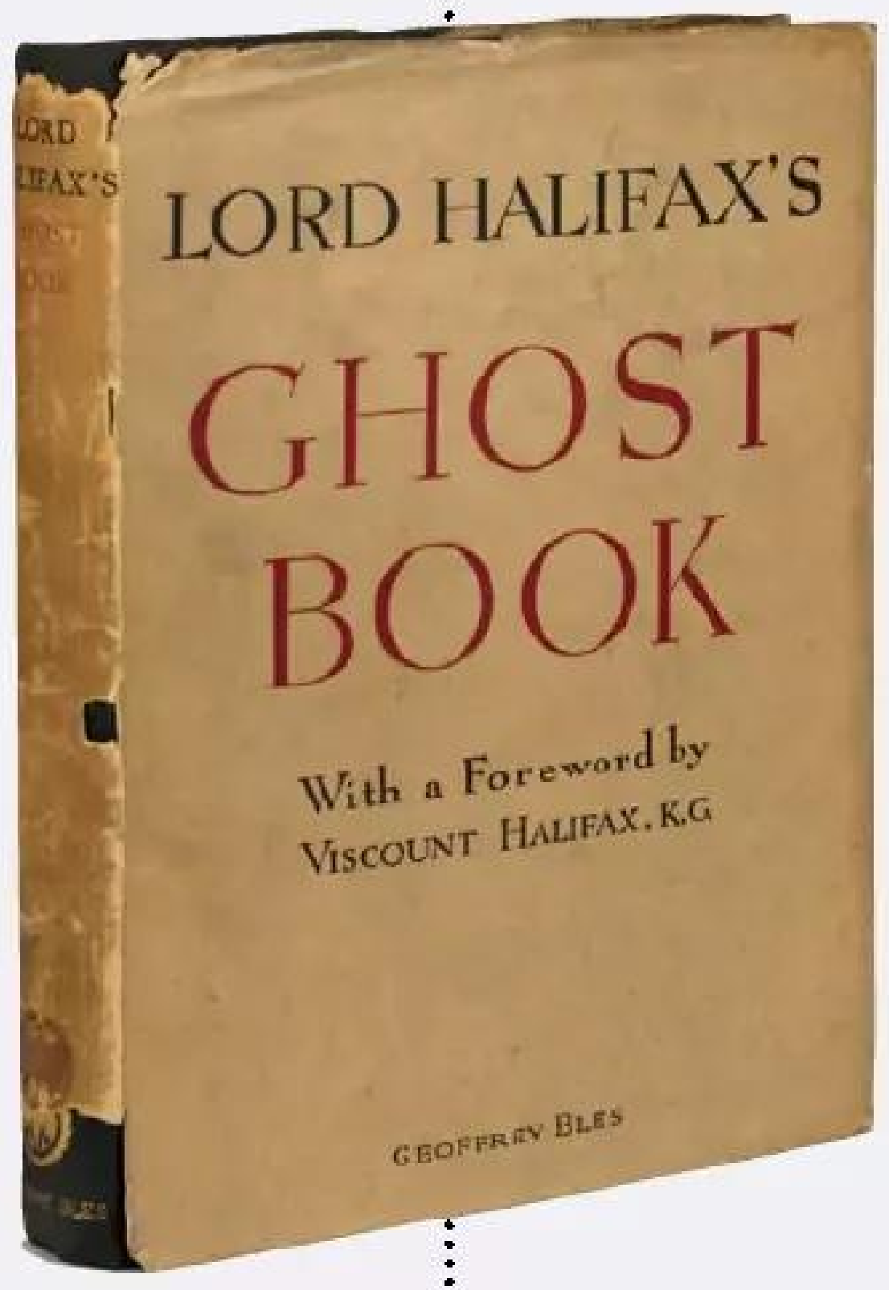
The Hammersmith tragedy did nothing to quell enthusiasm for ghosts amongst society at large. The demand for spooky entertainments of all kinds expanded in the 19th century with Charles Dickens cementing the connection to Christmas in his instant classic *A Christmas Carol* (1841). Reminiscent of a mediæval conversion story in where a sinner is driven to repentance by an encounter with a Purgatorial ghost, Dickens quadrupled the spectral content, with Scrooge encountering a classical chain-laden ghost, a luminous youthful figure, an awesome super-human Father Christmas or Pan-like apparition and, finally, a cowled, Death-like harbinger (see **FT270:51**). Reading his text closely, we may also find hints of noisy poltergeists when all the bells in Scrooge's house are set ringing as a prelude to a full manifestation by Jacob Marley.

More widely, Dickens played an important role in fixing Christmas celebration in the domestic home and in further capitalising upon a ghost as a theme in his magazine *Household Words*. The Christmas edition often carried ghost tales, establishing a fashion followed by other publications and inspiring collections such as *Tales for Christmas Eve* (1873) by Lady Rhoda Broughton. (For more on Dickens and ghosts, see **FT426:40-44**)

Such stories were enjoyed in convivial gatherings in urban households, read aloud to family circles illuminated by fitful flickering gas lamps and candelabras, or pored over alone privately in bedrooms and studies by adolescents and grown-ups, escaping for quiet moments away from party hi-jinks and red-faced laughter.



ABOVE: Dickens's *A Christmas Carol* fed the growing demand for Christmas ghost stories. **BELOW**: *Lord Halifax's Ghost Book* first appeared in 1936 and remains a classic of the genre.



In country districts, ghost stories were exchanged around firesides, but with a greater level of fear attaching. Rural spectres were often considered particularly dangerous at mid-winter. At Breccles Hall in Norfolk a phantom coach was credited with snatching the soul of a poacher, and at Boughton in Northamptonshire an encounter with a ghostly bride haunting a ruined church on Christmas Eve could prove fatal for witnesses. Rural phantoms continued demonstrating a remarkable physicality, manifesting in primitive and animalistic forms. In Devon the Black Dog of Torrington haunted an area around Copplestone Cross and a lane running to Down St Mary village crossroads. Villagers spoke of hearing a dog baying and a rushing sound as this beast raced by them; it was even blamed for demolishing walls.

One Christmas Day in the mid-19th century the ghostly Black Shuck dog pushed against a small blind boy standing on Thetford Bridge in Norfolk with his sister. The boy felt the animal brushing against him and called to his sister to send the big dog away, but the girl saw nothing and assured him there was no dog anywhere near them. The boy insisted there was and became increasingly desperate, saying it was trying to push him into the water. Suddenly the girl felt her brother being pulled away and in a flash of realisation she grasped what he felt but she was unable to see what must be the dreaded Black Shuck. Just in time she managed to save her brother from overbalancing into the water and then, hand in hand, the two children ran as fast as they could to their home. Their experience was recalled a century later by P Lillington, grandson of the girl concerned, in the *Cambridge News* in December 1956.

Showing how the appeal of ghost stories at Christmas spanned the class divide and the generations was illustrated at Hickleton Hall, seat of the Halifax baronetcy. Charles Lindley Wood, Lord Halifax, (1839-1934) had furniture removed in order to play party games and create "great romps" for the children. For them Christmas also meant access to their father's private chambers where he read them ghost stories selected from a private collection he compiled. Many years later these were published by his eldest son as *Lord Halifax's Ghost Book* in 1936, today still a much-loved classic of the 'true ghost story' genre.

(Sources, *Frivola*, Augustus Jessop, 1897; *The Ghost Hunter's Game Book*, James Wentworth Day, 1958; *The Folklore of East Anglia*, Enid Porter, 1974; *Northamptonshire Ghosts and Legends*, Marian Pipe, 2021; BL Hickleton Papers, A7.5, diary of Charles Lindley Wood, 1911).

THE CONSPIRASPHERE

In most mainstream systems of thought, the craziest outliers do not represent the whole; so why, asks **NOEL ROONEY**, is conspiracy theory treated so differently?

NUTS, NEWS AND NORMS

The majority of conspiracy theory stories that make the mainstream concern nutty claims by nutty people; they tend to the tabloid and are often sensational (or sensationalist) in nature. A man with a gun goes into a pizza parlour looking for the basement where 'they' eat the babies; King Charles is a shapeshifting lizard, like the rest of his family; the planet is a flat disc and 'they' are lying to us about it being spherical.

If this is what you see, it is no surprise if you characterise conspiracy theorists as nutters; perennial claimants of absurd notions that fly in the face of mundane reality. After all, these claims are hard to defend from a rational standpoint. All well and good, but in the Conspirasphere, these theories are generally also regarded as nutty; they are outliers, produced by outliers.

If we were to survey any large system of thought (science, religion, politics) we would find some seriously nutty theories: Lysenko's disastrous rebuttal of Darwinism and the mass starvation that resulted; Jim Jones and the unfortunate victims of the Jonestown massacre; the nationalist/fascist project in Europe during the 1930s. Clearly, all of these tragic and ridiculous events are also outliers. However, we do not generally characterise the entire system of thought as nutty merely because its constituency contains nutty thinkers.

We do exactly that, though, with conspiracy theory. For most of us, it is the outliers – people and theories – that represent the system. This, dear reader, as has been pointed out often enough by folks wiser than this writer, is a logical fallacy. Were we to adopt this attitude to more mainstream systems of thought, our cultural framework would quite quickly collapse under the weight of ridicule. More to the point, if we adopt this attitude we are unlikely to have a realistic picture of the system we are describing. If all animals were represented by the duck-billed platypus or the Tasmanian devil, how would nature look?

GENERALISING / FLICKR

If we were to survey any large system of thought we would find some seriously nutty theories

This fallacy has, I'd suggest, contaminated much academic discourse on conspiracism. Schools of psychology and political science – or at least their more opportunist members – that focus on conspiracy theory often use these outliers as exemplars. In fairness, academics have criticised this approach, particularly those from the school of social epistemology. But the public perception of conspiracy theory is, I think, largely shaped and influenced by slightly distorted views, and some at least of those distorted views stem from academia.

This by way of introduction to a vein of conspiracy theory that is probably unfamiliar to a majority of readers, whether or not you consider yourself immune to the bias I've outlined here. If Pizzagate is tabloid, and JFK research is broadsheet (I acknowledge this is a crude distinction) then what are we to make of conspiracy theory that involves patient historical research and where disputes hinge on a nuanced interpretation of Augustine's 'filioque' and its conceptually antagonistic relationship to theosis? (Readers who understood that sentence should consider – assuming they don't already have one – a PhD in patristics.)

I'm referring to analysis of the Ukraine conflict offered by Bernard Grover, the genial host of *Radio Far Side*, and its partial critique by Joseph P Farrell. In this rendition, the Ukraine war is merely a part of a larger conflict, ongoing for centuries, between Western and Eastern (Orthodox) Christianity. This is clearly conspiracy theory; it involves secret collaboration between members of political and religious elites; it speaks to the continued influence of monarchy beyond the photo-op modern travesty; and it recasts the mainstream narrative as a form of camouflage for something both larger and darker.

However, it is a very far cry from 'Hillary ate my baby' (the headline I have long yearned to see in the *Daily Star* or the *National Enquirer*). You may disagree with it (assuming you have the requisite knowledge to do so) or dismiss it (assuming you don't), but equating it with the irrational, sensational and above all superficial drivel that occasionally emerges from outliers would require blinkers that, I'd like to think, forteans at least don't normally sport.

According to surveys, something akin to 50 per cent of us believe in at least one conspiracy theory. It would be very comforting to assume that the statistic is simply pointing to the dumb half of humanity; comforting, but deeply unlikely. The fact of the matter is, there are people of genuine intellect engaged in conspiracy research, and their work, over time, has uncovered important evidence in a number of instances; some of the more troubling aspects of the Pearl Harbor attacks, or the major assassinations of the 1960s in the US, were identified and highlighted by people who might accept the label of conspiracy theorist with equanimity.

I'm not advocating for a conspiracy theory column in the *Guardian* (amusing as that might be). I'm very much not suggesting that you treat all conspiracy theories with the same degree of seriousness (although some social epistemologists argue for that position). I am suggesting that not all conspiracy theory belongs in the tabloid bargain basement. And, perhaps, I'd suggest that next time you find yourself chortling about loons in tin-foil headgear because your news outlet has filled a few column inches with nonsense, remember the word 'filioque' and take a breath.

Some might question why news media, some academics, and a lot of commentators persist in using the outlier as the norm. Some might contend that news media tend to do this for more mundane acts of dissent than conspiracism, and then label it conspiracy theory; and they might also ask why. But that, of course, is conspiratorial thinking.

https://expose-news.com/2024/10/23/what-religion-does-king-charles-follow/

https://radiofarside.substack.com/p/sunset-of-empires

ALIEN ZOO

NEWS FROM THE CRYPTOZOOLOGICAL GARDEN

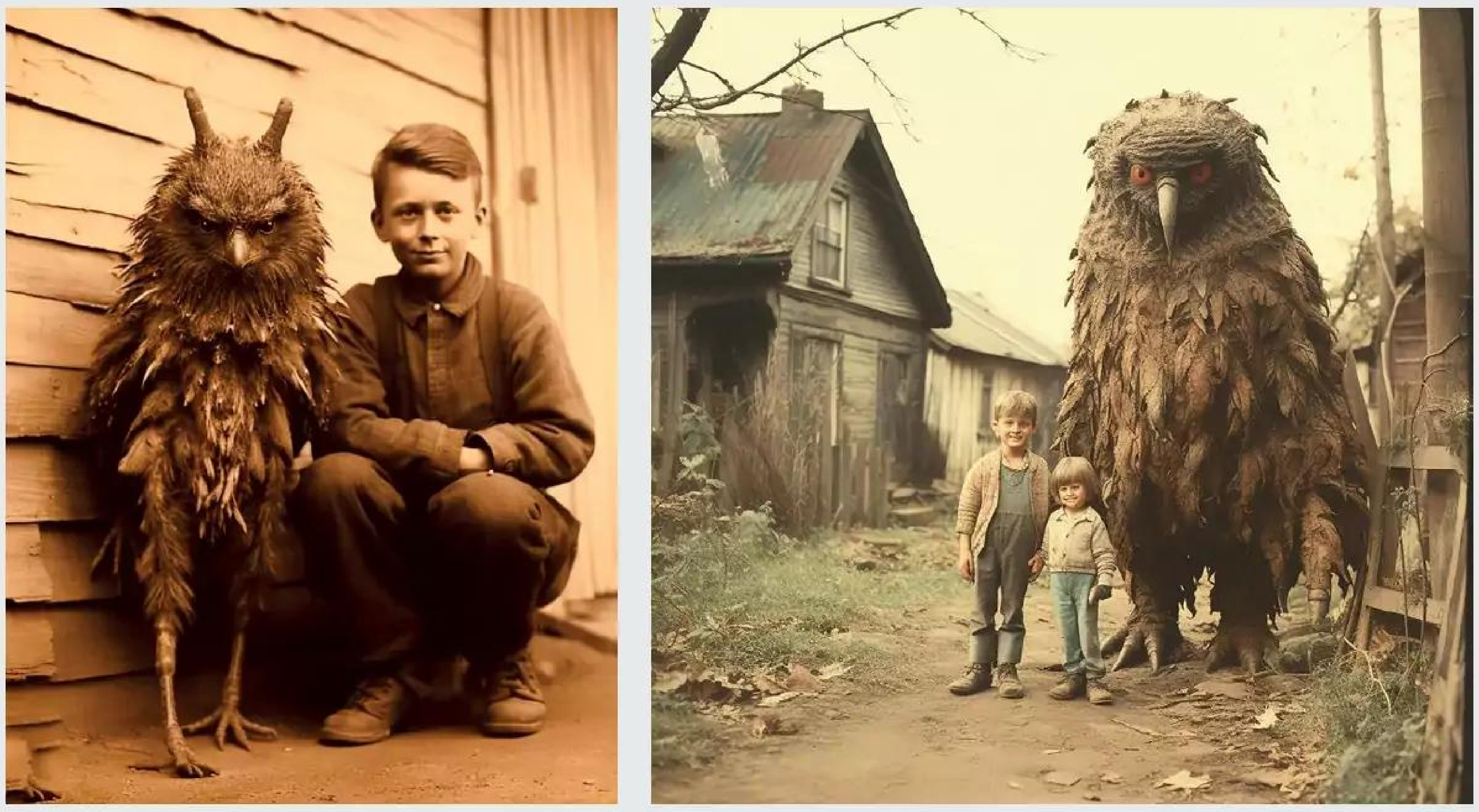
KARL SHUKER finds that AI's problem with feet extends to phoney crypto-critters

PINING FOR THE WEST COUNTRY

Once widespread across Great Britain, the pine marten *Martes martes*, a handsome arboreal relative of weasels and stoats, was virtually wiped out by hunting and habitat destruction, so that by the end of the 1800s it was seemingly confined wholly to Scotland, mostly the Highlands (though there is some evidence that a few small relict populations may have persisted in parts of central and southern England). Thanks to modern-day legal protection, however, its numbers have increased again, resulting in its distribution range expanding southward back into England and Wales, by natural means as well as by official (and also some unofficial?) reintroductions. Consequently, this species now occurs in northern England, Hampshire, Shropshire, and mid-Wales; on 3 July 2022, there was even a confirmed, ZSL-filmed sighting of one within woodland in southwest London. Moreover, after this mustelid was last recorded in southwest England over a century ago, the Devon Wildlife Trust has recently launched an official reintroduction programme here, releasing 15 healthy Scottish specimens (eight adult females and seven adult males) onto Dartmoor in the first phase of its plan to re-establish a resident pine marten population in the West Country. If the Dartmoor specimens thrive and reproduce, the second phase will go into action, involving the release of specimens onto Exmoor, straddling Devon and Somerset. So although this species is famously elusive, don't be startled if you should happen to spot one when you next visit these celebrated wildlife havens.

www.devonwildlifetrust.org/news/wild-once-more-pine-martens-return-south-west-england-after-100-year-absence, 2 Oct 2024; www.theguardian.com/environment/2022/sep/08/pine-marten-spotted-in-london-for-first-time-in-more-than-a-century, 8 Sept 2022.

CAROLINE LEGG



ABOVE: A pair of outsize AI owls that have appeared online in recent months; neither is likely to fool anyone. **BELOW:** The once widespread pine marten appears to be making a comeback in England.

AI OWLS ARE A HOOT!

AI-created 'vintage' photographs of supposed cryptids posted on the Internet are becoming ever more common, and ever more deceiving, nowadays. Scarcely a day goes by without correspondents emailing me examples they have found online, frequently reposted on social media, and wondering whether they might be genuine. Happily, although such images are often eye-catching, they invariably contain anatomical or other errors that readily expose them as AI-generated fakes (though as AI is constantly evolving and improving, there will soon come a time, I suspect, when its pictorial creations will pose a real threat to cryptozoological credibility).

By far the most common crypto-subject portrayed in these phoney photos is Bigfoot (Sasquatch), but in recent times I've seen a number of giant owl-themed photo-fakes too. Some are too crude to warrant any serious consideration, but two are sufficiently memorable to merit inclusion and discussion here, if only to alert readers to their true nature. The photo showing in close-up a supposed giant owl standing next to a crouching boy is particularly amusing, as the bizarre bird depicted in it looks nothing like a bona fide owl, (even given the interesting fact that owls actually have longer legs than is often realised, due to much of their length normally being hidden by the owl's plumage). Not only is its face decidedly un-owl-like (more like that of an eagle or some other raptor than any owl), as is the pair of grotesque fleshy horns sprouting from the top of its head (the 'horns' of real horned owls are merely tufts of feathers), but also its feet are deformed and wholly unlike those of authentic owls. Moreover, if you look closely, you'll notice that there is an anomalous third foot emerging incongruously from the owl's outer plumage and pressing against one of the horizontal wooden slats constituting the wall that owl and boy are posing alongside.

AI presently seems to experience major problems when depicting feet, in terms of both shape and number, as further demonstrated by the second 'giant owl' photo presented here. In this example, fundamental anatomical limitations dictate that the giant owl is impossibly big, and would look more at home on *Sesame Street* than it does in this photo, posing uncomfortably alongside two young children. Once again, its feet are structurally inaccurate, but, just to confirm beyond any shadow of doubt the owl's unnatural nature, there for all to see is another example of AI's tell-tale 'third foot syndrome'. In this instance, the extra foot seemingly consists of a single enormous clawed toe, hanging down limply from the owl's plumage.

I traced this particular photo to r/ai/Art, an AI art community posting on the website Reddit; it had apparently been created using the generative AI programme Midjourney. And I traced the horned owl/boy photo to a website named Liiper. On both sites, the respective photo was clearly identified as an AI image. Nevertheless, such pictures stir up very mixed and often very heated feelings, but I find them a hoot – especially when they portray giant owls!

www.reddit.com/r/aiArt/comments/18riwkq/odd_companions_1940s50s/?rdt=65138; https://liiper.com/strange-animals-vintage-photos-collection-ai-assets-46/

PRIVATE PARTS

Underwear makes news in China, while an Iranian man sees pink during sex and an investment banker gets intimate with a tree in Kensington Gardens

ABOVE: The Chongqing underwear storm of September 2024 saw smalls sailing over the city and falling from the sky.

CHINESE PANTS I

An unnamed Chinese company recently made public a text exchange between their customer support team and a member of the public. In these, the woman claimed that her daughter had become pregnant through wearing a pair of brand-new underpants bought from the company through Taobao, a major Chinese online retail platform. “My daughter is pregnant after wearing your underwear,” the woman wrote, and although the company’s staff answered that “underwear cannot be used as a means of transmission of pregnancy” the complainant insisted that this had happened and would not be placated, demanding an explanation. In the end, customer service told her that its factory staff were all women, and that their boss had had a vasectomy, so there was no way in which the girl’s pregnancy could have anything to do with the manufacturers. The company, though, went public with the exchange, fearing that the woman would do so herself, with damaging consequences for their image and business. Inevitably, their post went viral, resulting in speculation that the daughter was trying to avoid getting in trouble for premarital sex, or that she had become pregnant after swimming in a public pool, something that is equally impossible. Investigating further, though, the company CEO found that the complainer was a social media influencer hoping to generate clicks from stirring up scandal. “I hate this kind of people,” the CEO said. *odditycentral.com, 20 Aug 2024.*

CHINESE PANTS II

“I just went out and it suddenly started to rain heavily, and underwear fell from the sky,” said Ethele, a resident of Chongqing, China, posting on the social media platform Weibo, having experienced what has been dubbed the “the 9/2 Chongqing underwear crisis”. This was an unexpected storm on 2 September that involved heavy rain and gusts of wind of up to 76mph (122km/h), whisking laundry off the balconies of high rises in Chongqing and distributing it across the city. Douyin, the Chinese YouTube equivalent, was full of videos showing pants and bras flying through the skies, landing in the street and getting tangled in trees. As a result, the “underwear crisis” hashtag briefly became the 11th most popular across China; another suggesting “if you think you messed up at work, just think of the Chongqing Meteorological Bureau” also went viral.

Chongqing residents blamed the underwear apocalypse on cloud seeding carried out by Chinese authorities to ease an extreme heatwave that had been gripping the city. Just before the storm hit, they had launched 200 cloud seeding rockets into the sky, and when rain arrived, announced this had worked. However, when the winds blasted the city, bringing down billboards and trees as well as redistributing knickers, Zhang Yixuan, the deputy director of the Chongqing Weather Modification Office, said, “There are definitely strong winds, but this is caused by natural conditions. Artificial rainfall will not cause extreme weather.” Victims of the crisis did not seem to be taking the loss of their scanties very seriously, with one saying, “It’s actually quite romantic. You might even pick up your crush’s underwear while taking a walk on the street,” while another added “[Chongqing people] laugh about it because life is fun.” *theguardian.com, 9 Sept 2024.*

> *There were videos showing pants and bras flying through the skies*

IN THE PINK

A 31-year-old Iranian man described only as “Mr R” visited doctors because every time he orgasmed, everything he could see turned pink. In a paper on his experience in the journal *Psychiatry*, the doctors say: “He stated that during his orgasms, he experienced visual equity changes whenever his eyes were open, and he saw objects sharper and brighter than usual,” adding that “He described these changes as ‘high contrast vision with dominant pink colour everywhere’, and said that the environment became brighter as if it was early morning even if the environment was dark.” Mr R, a doctor himself, initially tried to deal with the condition by taking the antidepressant Sertraline, but when this had no effect, consulted colleagues, who, after a battery of tests, diagnosed the man as experiencing synæsthesia. This is a condition where sensory outputs get confused, so that people can “hear” colours and “taste” words, for example. Mr R is not the first person to report synæsthetic sex; others have reported experiences such as seeing orange at the start of sex, yellow during intercourse and then pink at climax. *dailymail.co.uk, 6 Sept 2024.*

TOTAL BANKER

Paolo Bollag, 30, an investment banker with Oakley Capital, was bailed by Westminster Magistrates Court after being arrested for an incident in London’s Kensington Gardens last April. He was seen undressing and “pleasuring himself” in the park before he “indulged in a series of lewd acts”, ramming soil into his underwear and rubbing his crotch. He then, allegedly, “thrust” his genitals into a tree, which, although not specifically identified, was said to be “in the shadow of the Albert Memorial”. Bollag denied a charge of outraging public decency, and was bailed on the condition that he does not enter the park again before his Crown Court trial begins later in the year. *dailymail.co.uk, 6 Jul 2024.*

STRANGE CONTINENT

ULRICH MAGIN rounds up the Euro-weirdness for Christmas, from Moby's dick to shitting logs

ABOVE: The dead 50ft (15m) sperm whale that appeared on Zurich's promendade in August.

KYMA SEA CONSERVATION & RESEARCH

WHALE TALES

A sperm whale in Lake Zurich? On 19 August, a dead 50ft (15m) sperm whale was found on the Utoquai, the promenade of Zurich. The large carcass was surrounded by workers in white protective suits and the dead animal was fenced off, with signs explaining that the International Whale Association was investigating the situation. However, the whale had not made its way up to the Swiss mountains by itself – it was a model made by the Belgian art collective Captain Boomer to protest for the protection of the seas. "Whale strandings have always been some magical event," the collective explained. "When it happened, whole villages were frightened and amazed. This is what we re-enact. And the whale is a symbol for our endangered eco-systems. People feel that their connection to nature is out of balance. We play with fiction and reality, and this enhances this feeling of estrangement." *nzz.ch, 19 Aug 2024.*

A great many porpoises visited German rivers this spring and summer, with a "record number" counted in the Ems, Elbe and Weser. They normally live in the North Sea, but swim upriver in spring to follow their prey, such as smelt, and feast on them before giving birth in June and July. They are counted each year by the registration of their clicking sonar sounds, as Thomas Taupp and Marco Gauger from the Federal Institute for Hydrology explained. "April of 2024 was a record-breaking year as regards the numbers of porpoises. Compared to previous years, we've detected 5-10 times more than usual." For most of the 20th century porpoises could no longer swim into the estuaries as the waters were too polluted. *scinexx.de, 3 Sept 2024.*

While clearing a beach near Snogebæk on Bornholm, Denmark, an island in the Baltic, two environmentalists came across what they thought was a 5ft (1.5m) sea-snake washed ashore. They brought their find to the Nature Centre Bornholm where Centre leader Kenneth Nielsen said he had no idea what kind of animal the carcass belonged to. They sent pictures of the beast to experts and learned that it was the penis of a subadult humpbacked whale. It is now believed that the penis comes from a young whale that had been washed ashore at Dueodde this July, already in an advanced state of decomposition. It will be exhibited in a museum. *lessentiel.lu, 20 Sept 2024.*

> *"A whale is a symbol for our endangered eco-systems"*

OUT-OF-PLACE ANIMALS

It was a poor summer for out-of-place animals in Europe, possibly because the almost weekly floods and forest fires which ruined many lives gave us no time for kangaroos and ABCs. But back in January, a "mysterious and large cat" was filmed at the side of the road at Mrzla Vodica in Gorski Kotar, Croatia. What were said to be images of a black panther were posted on social media. Identifications differed; many thought it was a serval, others a wildcat, still others a lynx – although none of these cats is black and all are smaller than a panther. *slobodenpecat.mk, 3 Jan 2024.*

Next was a croc in Catalonia. A night watchman guarding an inflatable attraction in the sea off Arenal beach, south of Tarragona, reported a crocodile at 7am on 21 August. He said it was swimming only a few metres from the beach and he managed to take a photo on his phone. Police arrived 20 minutes later to comb the area with boats and on foot, but the search yielded no results and the beach reopened for bathing around 10.30am. A yellow signal flag was flown just in case. The report concludes: "The only proof so far of the alleged presence of the crocodile on this beach is the tale of the night watchman and a photograph he took with his cell phone, and on which the crocodile cannot be distinguished from the water. The guard also explained that he saw tracks in the sand that could have been made by the reptile, which he said was some 1.5m [5ft] in length." *lavanguardia.com, 21 Aug 2024.*

VANISHING ATHLETES

After the Paralympic Games in Paris, two Congolese athletes, Mireille Nganga and Emmanuel Grace Mouambako, vanished without trace. Both had served as their country's flag bearers at the opening ceremony, and there has been no sign of them since 5 September. French judicial authorities began an investigation on 7 September, but could offer little evidence pointing to a solution other than that "a third person was also missing". It is reported that the only known clue is that their suitcases are missing, but their passports are still with the Congolese delegation, and their fate remains a mystery. The Congo Paralympic Committee declined to comment on the incident. *fr.de, 16 Sept 2024.*

OLDEST WOMAN DIES

On 20 August 2024, Maria Branyas, the oldest person in the world recognised by Guinness World Records (see **FT445:4-5**), passed away in Spain at the age of 117. She was born on 4 March 1907 in San Francisco and had moved with her family to Spain in 1915. She lived in a retirement home in Olot, in the northeast of the country and believed her longevity was due to "good genes". She had never been ill or visited a hospital and survived a Covid-19 infection in 2020. "Maria Branyas has left us. She died the way she wanted: in her sleep, peacefully and without pain," her family wrote on X. *La Vanguardia, 20 Aug 2024.*

OVERZEALOUS

In 1980, Zurich graffiti artist Harald Naegeli sprayed a skeleton, one of many forming a Dance of Death, on the walls of St Cäcilien Church in Cologne, Germany. Most of the images have since disappeared, but this one remained, as what was initially regarded as a nuisance was later protected as a state monument due to the artist's growing fame. In September 2024, a cleaning team paid by the city of Cologne to remove unwanted graffiti accidentally finished off this famous example as well. Naegeli was asked to restore his famous artwork, but at 84 feels too old. Specialists have resprayed the skeleton, guided by photographs. In a similar vein, in 1986 a cleaning woman removed a clump of fat from a Joseph Beuys artwork in Düsseldorf. *deutschlandfunk.de, 13 Sept 2024.*

RAIMOND SPEKKING / WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

ABOVE LEFT: Artist Harald Naegeli and the Cologne skeleton. **ABOVE RIGHT**: A contemporary Catalonian *Caga tió* or 'shitting log'.

WEIRD CHRISTMAS

As Christmas approaches, I thought we might look at some of the stranger traditions celebrating the holiday. First, it has to be said that many of these are fairly recent: the first Christmas trees, for example, stood in the Alsace and the Black Forest in the 15th century – long after Germany was a pagan country.

Still, some traditions *look* remarkably odd. In Iceland, the 13 Christmas trolls play the role of tricksters. They were asked by their mother Gryla to bring all naughty children to her so she could cook them in a large pot. But the young trolls disobeyed; they didn't steal the children, only the meals the humans were cooking. From 12 December, Gryla's trolls pay visits to Icelandic households on each day of the holiday. They are all named after their favourite food. On 23 December, for example, it is Ketkrókur's turn, the "meat grabber" who steals the Christmas Roast. Up until 24 December, Iceland's kids put a shoe on the window sill or doorstep and find in it sweets that one of the Christmas trolls has left for them. *Kölner Stadt-Anzeiger, 23 Dec 2023.*

In Catalonia, the *Tió de Nadal* or *Caga tió* (Christmas log or 'shitting' log) is a wooden log about a foot in length, sometimes standing on stick legs. It is put up on 8 December and covered all night with a blanket so it does not feel the cold. Children have to take care of it, feed it and keep it warm. They feed it because it will literally 'shit' presents on Christmas Day, when the log is placed partly in a fire and hit with a stick to help it. The children sing: *"Shit, tió, hazelnuts and nougats, do not shit herrings, for they are too salty, shit nougats, for they taste better."* Before the kids do this, they assemble in a different room to pray! During this time, the parents place small presents under the blanket that keeps the *Tió* warm which the kids are obliged to share. As in the rest of Spain, the Magi bring the larger presents on 6 January.

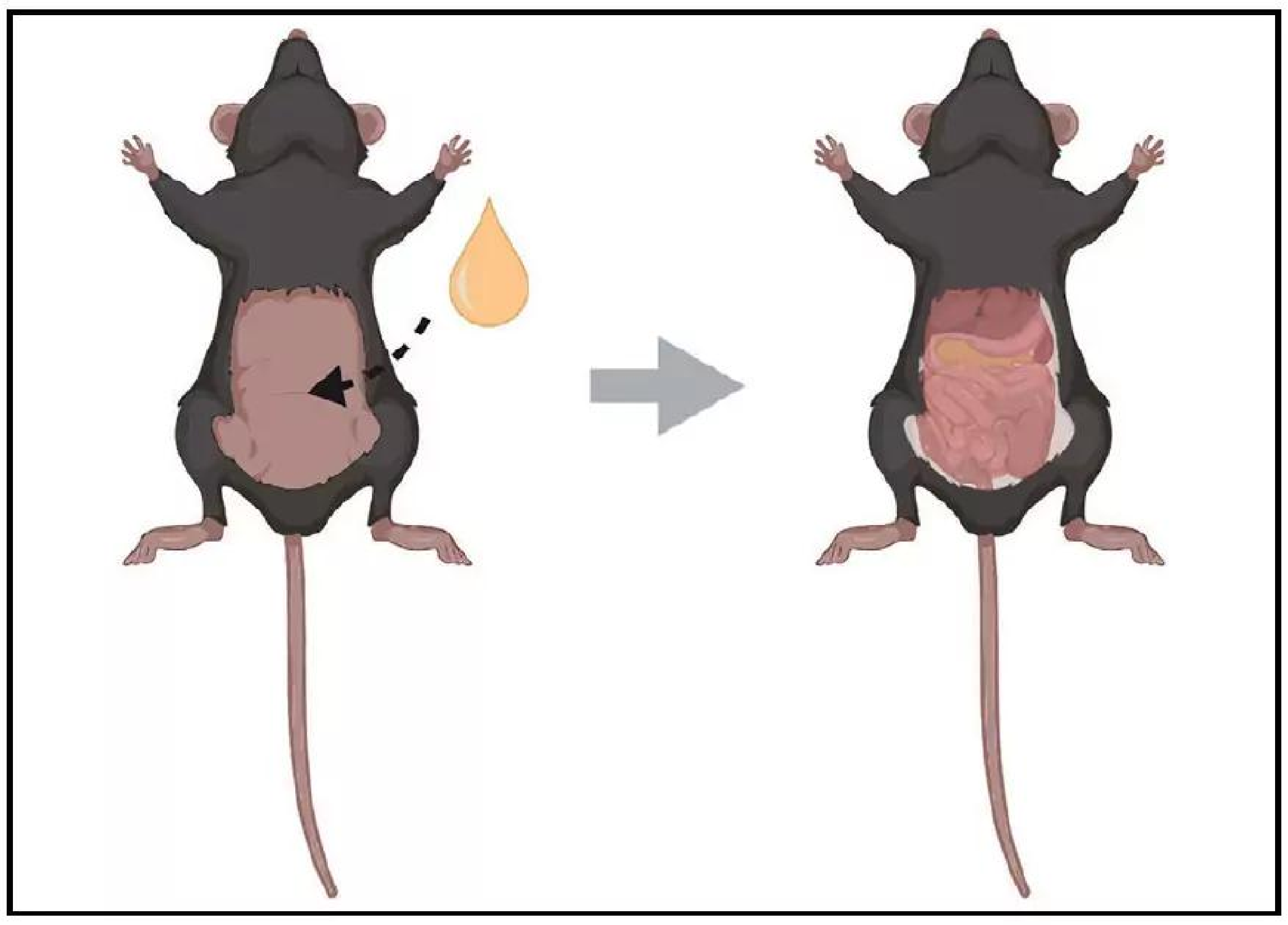
In Sweden, the Christmas Goat was first mentioned in the 11th century. While in Britain and in the United States, men dress up as Father Christmas/ Santa Claus, in Sweden they dress as a goat and hand out presents to the family. The Swedes hang toy goats in their Christmas trees, and all larger cities erect large straw goats adorned with red ribbons (like the one in Gävle that has been repeatedly burned down; see **FT338:6, 352:9, 441:9**).

100 YEARS AGO

"A viper in the stomach of a living human. The daughter of a rich Swiss landowner, 21-year-old Marie Rosser, died in the Berne University Hospital on 18 December [1924]. The girl was sick in the hospital for weeks and suffered unspeakable torment, especially in the last week before her death. Despite their best efforts, the doctors at the hospital were unable to determine the cause of her illness. Professors from Geneva were called to the girl's bedside, but they were no more able to help her than their Bernese colleagues. A few days ago even a famous French internist, professor at the Sorbonne, appeared at the bedside of the girl who was constantly complaining of terrible stomach pains. The Parisian professor examined her, but was unable to determine the cause of the torment. The girl died in the hospital and the director, Professor Braun, asked the parents to allow him to clarify the strange case of illness in the interest of science by dissecting the unfortunate woman's corpse. The dissection was done and... Professor Braun found a live, well-developed viper in the stomach of the unfortunate woman. During the dissection, the snake appeared so suddenly that the professor was almost bitten by it. It was now clear to the doctors why the unfortunate girl had to endure such terrible torture. The doctors had falsely believed that she was suffering from a stomach ulcer and prescribed a strict diet for her. The less food the unfortunate woman ate, the more unbearable her pain became. The viper in the stomach could not feed itself and bit through the stomach wall of the unfortunate woman. When the young girl was finally allowed to eat some food, the viper satisfied its appetite and the patient had peace for a while. Now the question arose as to how the snake got into the girl's stomach. […] The father remembered that his daughter had taken a trip to the mountains about two months before. During the trip, the young girl felt intense thirst, which she quenched at a forest spring... Now the case was clear to the professor. Vipers must live in the spring water from which the young lady unfortunately drank. […] The snake developed in the girl's stomach and bit the stomach wall. The death of the intelligent and pretty young lady, who attended the University of Berne and also played a certain role in the society there, arouses general regret in Berne." *Kärntner Zeitung, 30 Dec 1924.*

MEDICAL BAG

Another batch of health-related horrors, from terrifying tapeworm infestations and invasive cockroaches to Florida's worst surgeon...



DR ZIHAO OU

ABOVE: Dr Zihao Ou holds a vial of the common yellow food colouring tartrazine in solution. Just add it to your mouse to create a see-through rodent!

INVISIBILITY SERUM

Zihao Ou, a physicist at the University of Texas at Dallas, and his colleagues have published a paper that describes a technique to make the skin of mice transparent using a mixture of water and tartrazine, a common yellow food colouring frequently used in crisps, candy coating, ice cream and baked goods. "For those who understand the fundamental physics behind this, it makes sense; but if you aren't familiar with it, it looks like a magic trick," said Ou. "We combined the yellow dye, which is a molecule that absorbs most light, especially blue and ultraviolet light, with skin, which is a scattering medium," he explained. "Individually, these two things block most light from getting through them but when we put them together, we were able to achieve transparency of the mouse skin."

Once the mouse skin had absorbed the tartrazine solution, it was possible to see blood vessels directly on the surface of the brain through the transparent skin of the skull. The internal organs could also be seen in the abdomen as well as the muscle contractions moving food through the digestive tract. "It just works. You rub it on a mouse, and you can see what it had for breakfast. It's that powerful," said optical physicist Jon Gorecki. "So far, we only tested soft tissues, including brain, muscle, and skin," said Ou. "We haven't done much investigation with hard tissues such as bone, so I am not sure if we would be able to make the mouse completely invisible." The team haven't yet tried the technique on humans, for whom it could have numerous applications. Human skin, though, is 10 times thicker than a mouse's, so tartrazine may not be as effective. *editions.cnn.com, 10 Sept 2024.*

BORN WITH A TAIL

Surgeons at AIIMS Bibinagar hospital successfully removed a tail from a three-month-old child from Telangana state in southern India in January. The baby boy was born with a 15cm (6in) tail growing from his lower back which was removed by Dr Shasanka Shekhar Panda and his team. "After removing it, we reconstructed the child's spinal canal. There was Spina Bifida connected with the spinal cord which was dissected meticulously with repair of dura," said Dr Panda, announcing the successful recovery of the patient six months after the operation. "Human tails are very rare, with approximately 40 cases reported worldwide in medical literature," he said. His colleague Dr Rama Chandra Deo explained that "Although 26 cases of bony tail have been reported in the world so far, this is the only known case of a bony human tail in the thoracic region." *independent.co.uk, 17 Jul 2024.*

PORK HORROR

A 23-year-old woman from Yubeng Village, Tibet, given the pseudonym of Tingting in news reports, visited the Provincial First Hospital in Diqing Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture after a month of suffering strange symptoms. These started with persistent headaches and pain in her thighs, which then spread to other parts of her body. At times she would suffer violent pains in her eyes that left her crying. At the hospital, Tingting was given a brain MRI scan and a full-body CT scan. The images revealed that her brain, thighs, back muscles and abdominal wall were riddled with tapeworm cysts, and that they had even spread to her tongue, facial muscles and eyeballs. "The patient had bulging eyes, retinal hæmorrhage, multiple infections throughout the body, and epileptic seizures," reported neurologist Professor Meng Qiang. Tingting explained that in her family there was a tradition of eating raw pork, saying, "We eat raw pork on the day of slaughtering the pig," and that she had been doing so for 13 years. Qiang was concerned about the potential consequences of the infestation for Tingting, saying, "The most common consequence is epilepsy, and it may also cause intellectual impairment. Some patients may also experience limb paralysis, language dysfunction, sensory impairment, etc." He hoped, though, that with the right treatment these could be avoided in this case and planned to deal with the tapeworms by administering small doses of insecticides to gradually kill them as there was potential for the dead parasites to cause severe inflammatory or allergic reactions. He also warned people to wash their hands after handling raw pork and to always cook the meat thoroughly before eating it as this will destroy any parasites. *unilad.com, 22 Aug 2024.*

EYE STING

Also suffering pain in the eye was a 55-year-old man from Philadelphia who went to hospital with a bee sting in his right eyeball. Doctors believed they had managed to remove the sting, but two days later he was still suffering pain in the eye and was experiencing worsening vision, which, by the time he arrived at the Wills Eye Hospital, had deteriorated to the point where he was only able to count fingers held immediately in front of his face. His eye was swollen, inflamed and bloodshot, and blood was visibly pooling at the bottom of his iris. Examination showed that a tiny fragment of the sting was still stuck in the corner of his eye. "I am not surprised that the ER missed a small fragment," said Talia Shoshany, who treated the patient. "They pulled out the majority of the stinger, but the small fragment was only able to be visualised at a slit lamp," a specialised ophthalmological microscope. She extracted the remains of the sting which "needed to be pulled out with ophthalmic-specific microforceps" and prescribed antibiotics and eye drops, after which the patient made a full recovery. Soshany reported that "ocular bee stings are very rare" and estimated that, while their incidence rate is not known, the odds of getting stung in the eye by a bee were probably less than being struck by lightning, which stand at one in 15,300. *arstechnica.com, 28 Jun 2024.*

ROACH RONK

As he was going to sleep, a 58-year-old man in Haikou, Hainan, China, was startled awake by the sensation of something crawling up his nose, then sliding down his throat. He tried to cough up whatever it was, but nothing emerged, so he went back to sleep. He forgot about the incident, but over the next few days found that he had persistently evil smelling breath. He then started to cough up thick yellow sputum, so sought medical help. An ENT specialist at Hainan Hospital examined his upper respiratory tract, but found nothing untoward there. The patient, though, was convinced there was something wrong, so he was referred to respiratory specialist Dr Lin Ling, who carried out a CT scan of the man's chest. The scan showed a shadow in the lower right lobe of the lungs, suggesting that some kind of foreign object had become lodged in it, so Ling inserted a camera down the man's throat into his lung. "During the procedure I clearly saw something with wings in the bronchus," said Ling, "the foreign body was wrapped in a lot of phlegm. After sucking out the surrounding phlegm, the foreign body was exposed. It was a cockroach." Ling extracted the insect and thoroughly washed the area to clear the phlegm, this eradicated the foul stench, and the man made a swift recovery and was discharged the next day. *hinews.cn, 4 Sept 2024.*

FLORIDA DOCTOR

While on holiday in Florida, William Bryan, 70, started to experience persistent pain in his lower left abdomen, so went to the Ascension Sacred Heart Emerald Coast Hospital to get it checked out. Doctors detected an abnormality in his spleen and admitted him for further tests. General Surgeon Dr Thomas Shaknovsky and Chief Medical Officer Dr Christopher Bacani told Bryan that he needed immediate surgery or "could experience serious complications". Shaknovsky took him to the operating theatre to remove his spleen. However, during the operation he removed Bryan's liver instead, which, Bryan's lawyers claimed, caused "immediate and catastrophic blood loss resulting in death". The human liver is a large organ found on the upper right of the abdominal cavity, just under the diaphragm, while the spleen is much smaller and on the left of the abdomen, and the two are easily distinguishable. Shaknovsky, though, insisted the removed organ really was the spleen, and told Bryan's widow that her husband's "'spleen' was so diseased that it was four times bigger than usual and had migrated to the other side of [his] body". During the autopsy, the medical examiner determined that Bryan's removed liver was exactly that, and was healthy, while his spleen, which had not been touched by surgery, had a small cyst on it that was the likely cause of the pain and would have only needed a minor procedure to remove. Bryant's wife sued the hospital, who dissociated themselves from Shaknovsky, but her lawyers claim that Shaknovsky had form, having excised a portion of a patient's pancreas the previous year instead of performing the intended adrenal gland resection. *nypost.com, 4 Sept 2024.*

MYTHCONCEPTIONS

by Mat Coward

286: THE CHRISTMAS ROBIN

Merry Christmas!

ILLUSTRATIONS BY HUNT EMERSON

The myth

The robin is associated with Christmas in Britain because it appears in gardens seasonally – or, if not that, then because its red breast is reminiscent of the tunic worn by Victorian postmen.

The "truth"

Both these myths are easily dealt with. The European robin (*Erithacus rubecula*) is present all year round, and is one of our most commonly encountered birds in summer as in winter. As for the posties, it's undoubtedly true that the connection was popularly made between the orange of the bird's breast and the scarlet which was part of the mail carrier's outfit from the late 18th to mid-19th centuries. This may explain the ubiquity of robins on Christmas *cards* (invented 1843), but they had been a symbol of the season more generally for centuries before that, appearing for instance in traditional Christmas songs and rhymes. Along with wrens, robins were ceremonially hunted by boys on St Stephen's Day; by contrast, the bird was sacred to our pre-Christian ancestors, and via folkloric memories into the early modern period. In Christian mythology, the robin was stained with Jesus's blood after it tried to comfort him on the cross (though wouldn't that make it an Easter symbol, not a Christmas one?). Destitute children in Victorian times were often called "poor robins", and since many early Christmas cards featured charitable themes, this might partly account for the bird's prominence on them. It's perhaps also worth mentioning that robins were common on 19th century Valentine cards, and since Christmas cards largely evolved from the Valentine the robin may simply have migrated from the one to the other.

Sources

www.postalmuseum.org/collections/highlights/postal-uniforms; *Christmas in nineteenth-century England* by Neil Armstrong (MUP, 2010); *The Englishman's Christmas* by JAR Pimlott (Harvester Press, 1978); *Christmas: A History* by Judith Flanders (Picador, 2017); *The History of the Christmas Card*

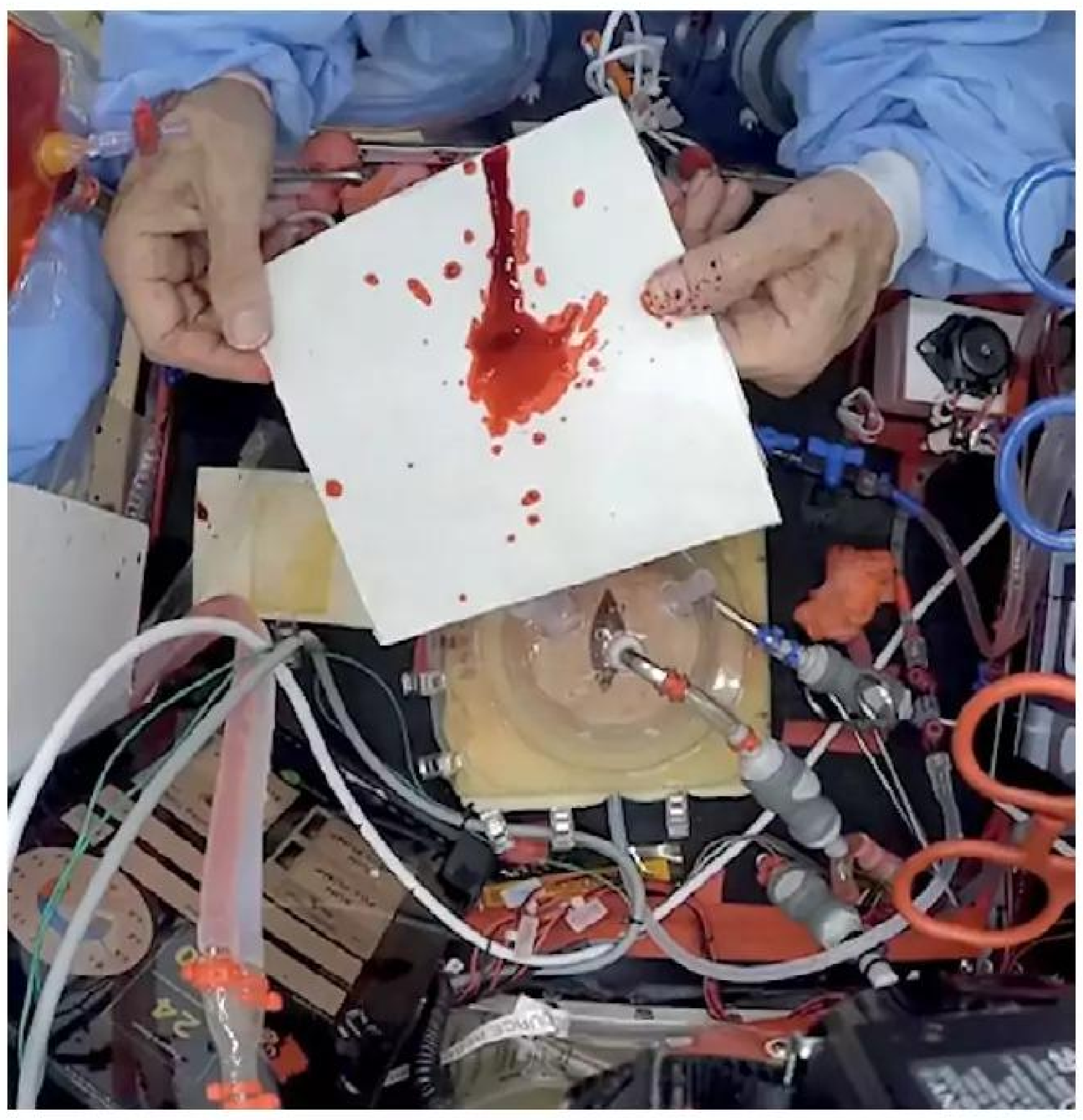
Mythchaser

In response to moans that the Christmas season gets longer every year it's sometimes said that the festivities of certain communities in mediæval England began on All Hallows' Eve (31 October) and ended on Candlemas (2 February). Is anyone out there sober enough to find evidence of this?

NEW SPACE ODDITIES

CSI in space, cheese on a rocket, lunar Lego, alien sun tans and meteorite-infused vodka...

GRUYERE SPACE PROGRAM


ZACK KOWALSKE

ABOVE LEFT: A piece of Gruyère cheese strapped to the leg of a rocket; what could possibly go wrong? **ABOVE RIGHT**: Experiments to study bloodstain patterns in zero gravity were conducted aboard a modified Boeing 727 parabolic aircraft. **BELOW**: The European Space Agency has teamed up with Lego to make 'space bricks'.

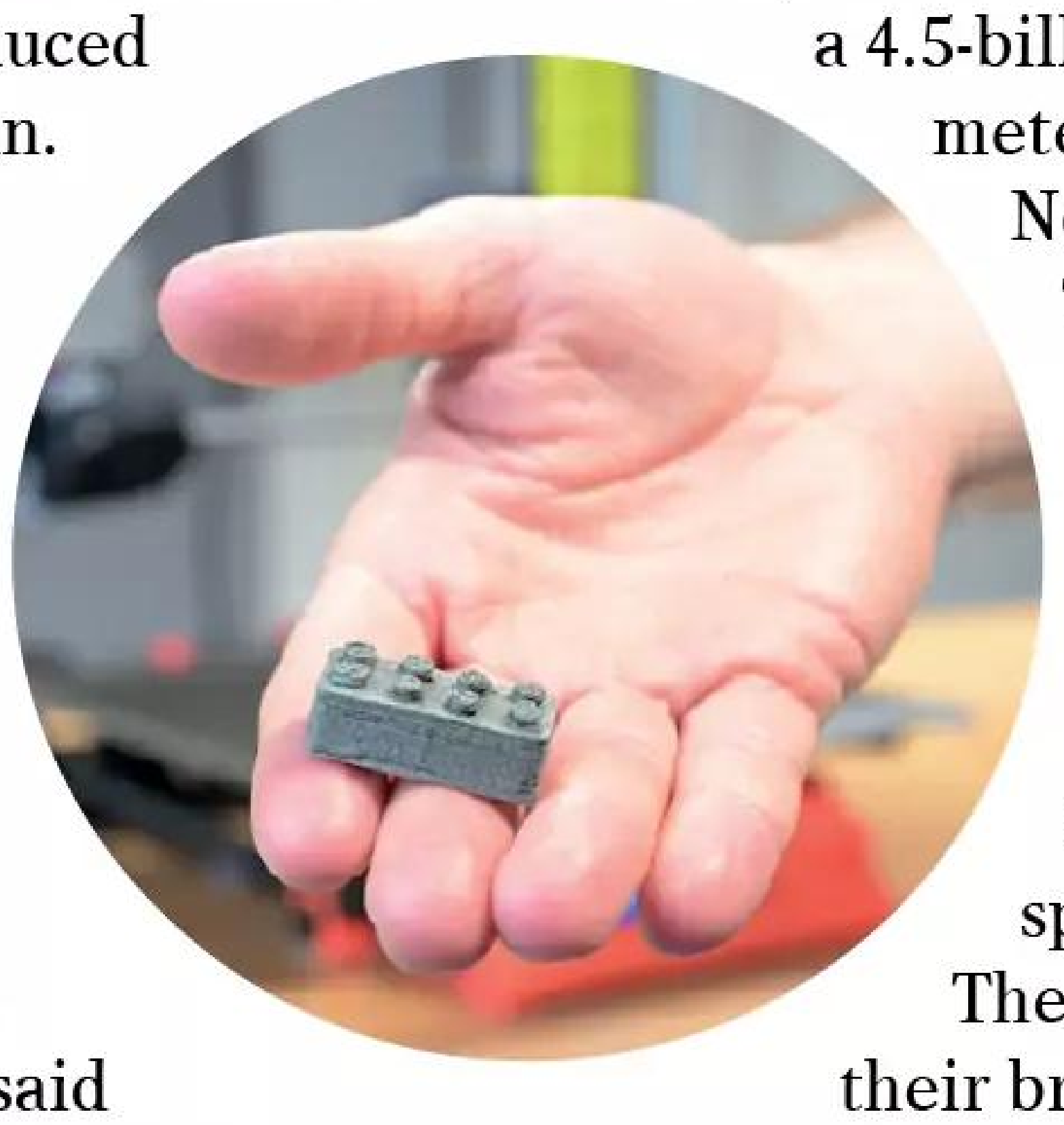
OUTLAND

A team of forensic scientists from Staffordshire University and the University of Hull have been collaborating with an American crime scene investigator to develop the new discipline of Astroforensics for investigating potential off-world crime. Using the Zero Gravity Corporation's modified Boeing 727 parabolic aircraft, also known as "the vomit comet", to simulate zero gravity, they have been investigating how blood splatters might form in space. Researchers used a mixture of 40% glycerine and 60% food colouring to simulate the relative density and viscosity of human blood, then squirted droplets from a hydraulic syringe toward a target during periods of reduced gravity of between 0.00 and 0.05g and reconstructed the angle of impact. Zack Kowalske, the US Crime Scene Investigator on the project says, "Studying bloodstain patterns can provide valuable reconstructive information about a crime or accident," adding "However, little is known about how liquid blood behaves in an altered gravity environment. This is an area of study that, while novel, has implications for forensic investigations in space." The researchers found that in zero gravity blood is more likely to stick to surfaces and that blood droplets have shapes and sizes that differ significantly from those that form on Earth. "With the lack of gravitational influence, surface tension and cohesion of blood droplets are amplified," said Professor Graham Williams from the University of Hull. Kowalske added: "Astroforensics is a novel subdiscipline that is in its infancy. Broadening the understanding of all forensic sciences in non-terrestrial environments is critical as we expand into a space-faring species." *metro.co.uk, 11 May 2024.*

> *"The cheese created an aero effect that led to the rocket over-spinning"*

SPACE CHEESE DISASTER

In an attempt to achieve the region's first "rocket hop" test, students involved in the Gruyère Space Program in Lausanne, Switzerland, needed to launch their rocket, then have it land back on Earth safely. They achieved their aim, but only narrowly avoided disaster. In acknowledgement of the project's name, the students decided to strap some of the region's famed cheese to one of the rocket's legs. However, this had unintended consequences. "Yes, it was indeed Gruyère, and it almost caused a disaster!" said project leader Jérémy Marciacq. "The cheese created an aero effect that led to the rocket over-spinning." It seems the additional weight of the dairy product destabilised the rocket and introduced the unwanted spin. Fortunately, this was not enough to completely wreck the test, and the cheese survived unmelted. "In the end, it all worked out, and we actually ate it after the flight," said Marciacq. "It was slightly warm, but still quite tasty!" He added that "it allowed us to discover some limits to our design – notably for roll control." *futurism.com, 26 Oct 2024.*


EUROPEAN SPACE AGENCY

LUNAR LEGO

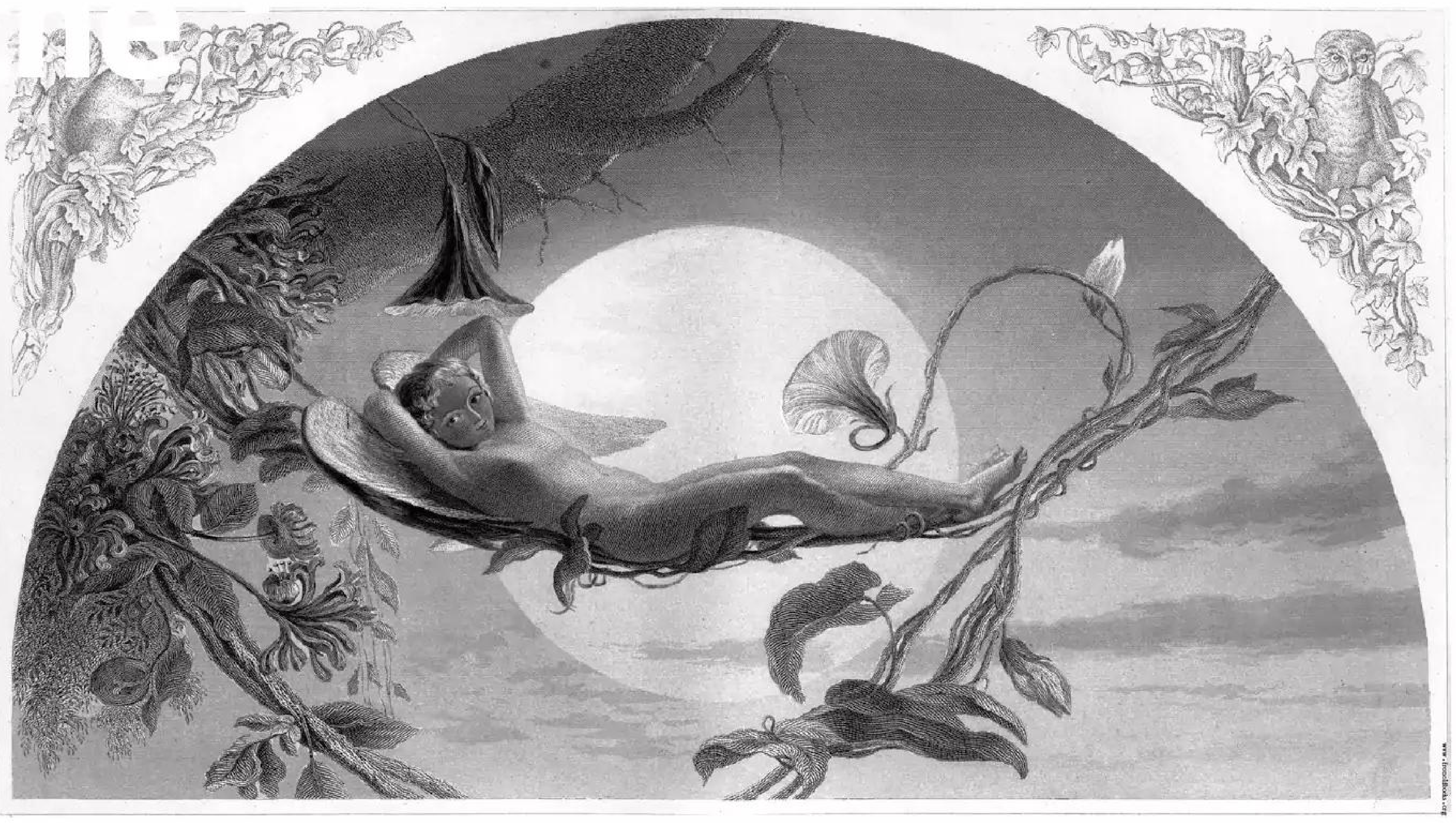
With a variety of organisations seriously gearing up to return humans to the Moon for the first time in over 50 years, this time aiming for long-term habitation, researchers are investigating ways to build structures there without having to haul all the materials up from Earth. One experiment, by the European Space Agency (ESA), has involved collaborating with Lego to use precious meteorite dust to create "space bricks". There is very little lunar surface material available on Earth, so the ESA ground up a 4.5-billion-year-old meteorite from Northern Africa. This was then mixed with a thermoplastic and simulated lunar regolith and used to 3D print the space bricks. The team says their bricks work just like regular Lego and allow them to experiment with different structures. This enables researchers to test the mechanics of bricks made from lunar surface material to help them plan buildings for future human habitation. *extremetech.com, 28 Jun 2024.*

STAR TAN

In June, Munich's Festival of the Future gave visitors the opportunity to get a tan from the light on alien worlds with the first-ever stellar tanning salon. The salon used tanning lamps to simulate the spectra of a variety of stars, including bright, bluish-white light from Vega and the red glow of the supergiant Betelgeuse. "With a star tan, you'll be able to experience life on alien planets vicariously," said Jonathon Keats, the conceptual artist behind the idea, "You'll get the benefits of space tourism without the trouble and expense." To enhance the experience, the salon serves meteorite mineral water – water that has had meteorite fragments from other worlds such as Mars soaked in it. *space.com, 29 Jun 2024.*

SPIRIT OF DISCOVERY

Taking the meteorite infusion idea much further is the Pegasus distillery in France. They have created an ultra-premium vodka called Shooting Star. This is made from locally sourced French wheat and botanicals distilled using advanced iStill technology, then reduced for a month with pure spring water from a 150m (492ft) deep well below their Burgundy distillery. After this, it is aged for a year in small batches in terracotta jars with pieces of meteorite suspended in them, which allegedly infuses the vodka with a mineral flavour. "The presence of chondrite, a mineral unique to meteorites, in the final product, provides a unique mineral flavour that complements the existing smooth and refined texture that characterises our vodkas," said Pegasus CEO Maxine Girardin. Only 4,806 bottles of Shooting Star have been made, and they are being sold for $200 (£154) each. *odditycentral.com, 30 May 2024.*



FAIRIES, FOLKLORE AND FORTEANA

SIMON YOUNG FILES A NEW REPORT FROM THE INTERFACE OF STRANGE PHENOMENA AND FOLK BELIEF

CHRISTMAS ENCOUNTERS

Parents be warned. No child under 10 should read what follows… My sermon today concerns someone whom you have been seeing quite a lot of recently. I refer to Old Man Christmas who – like Isis – goes by many names: Saint Nick, Santa Claus, Father Christmas, Papa Noel… Ask yourself, how often did you glimpse his diabolical face in windows and on decorations the last time you walked into town? North Koreans see fewer pictures of Kim Jong Un strolling through Pyongyang. Then there are also, during his December tyranny, doubles in shopping malls and church halls handing out 'gifts' and terrifying toddlers. *"Come and sit on my knee, little boy…"*

THERE ARE DOUBLES IN SHOPPING MALLS AND CHURCH HALLS TERRIFYING TODDLERS

I've been collecting, for a few years, the fortean accounts of adults who remember, when young, seeing Santa Claus in the sky or in their houses; another low-grade memory is shared by the many children who heard sleigh bells as they were trying to fall asleep. Along the same lines, there are witnesses who heard sleighs landing on roofs or an overweight pensioner struggling down the chimney. I'm charmed, but not impressed: give me a glass of wine and I hear the Brandenburg Concertos as I'm dropping off.

We have, as well, Santa encounters of the second kind. Typically, kids visit the sitting room after lights out and see HIM putting gifts around the tree. The easiest explanation here is that Dad was glimpsed present-laying in a darkened room, tottering from one too many sherries and happy that the wretched festival was almost over. How many children had sadder experiences of this type, I wonder: "I believed in Father Christmas… [then] I saw him and through his disguise"? The most fascinating cases are when there is interaction. One young girl (6-8) spotted, for instance, a man dressed in red on the roof hiding (I love this detail) behind an inflatable reindeer. "His eyes caught mine and he moved a finger up to his mouth as if shushing me."

Should we be shocked? No! Kids primed by parents and the advertising industry for weeks, hyped up on sugar and with expectations of transformative gifts, see and hear things. Perhaps the real question is: are kids imagining or imagining-into-being the red menace? There are, after all, similar accounts of the Tooth Fairy, the Easter Bunny and some other tulpa-begging deplorables. The sceptic will say, instead, that memories are moulded and the shadow before the tree, when I was six, becomes a red man when I'm a teen and full-out Santa by the time I'm 20. I would love to write a longer piece on this for Christmas 2025. So if anyone can contribute their Christmas Eve encounters to the FT letters page…

Simon is the editor of *The Cottingley Fairy Photographs: New Approaches to Fairies, Fakes and Folklore.*

They are us

NIGEL WATSON asks if cosmic entities are working behind the scenes – or is it just our own minds?

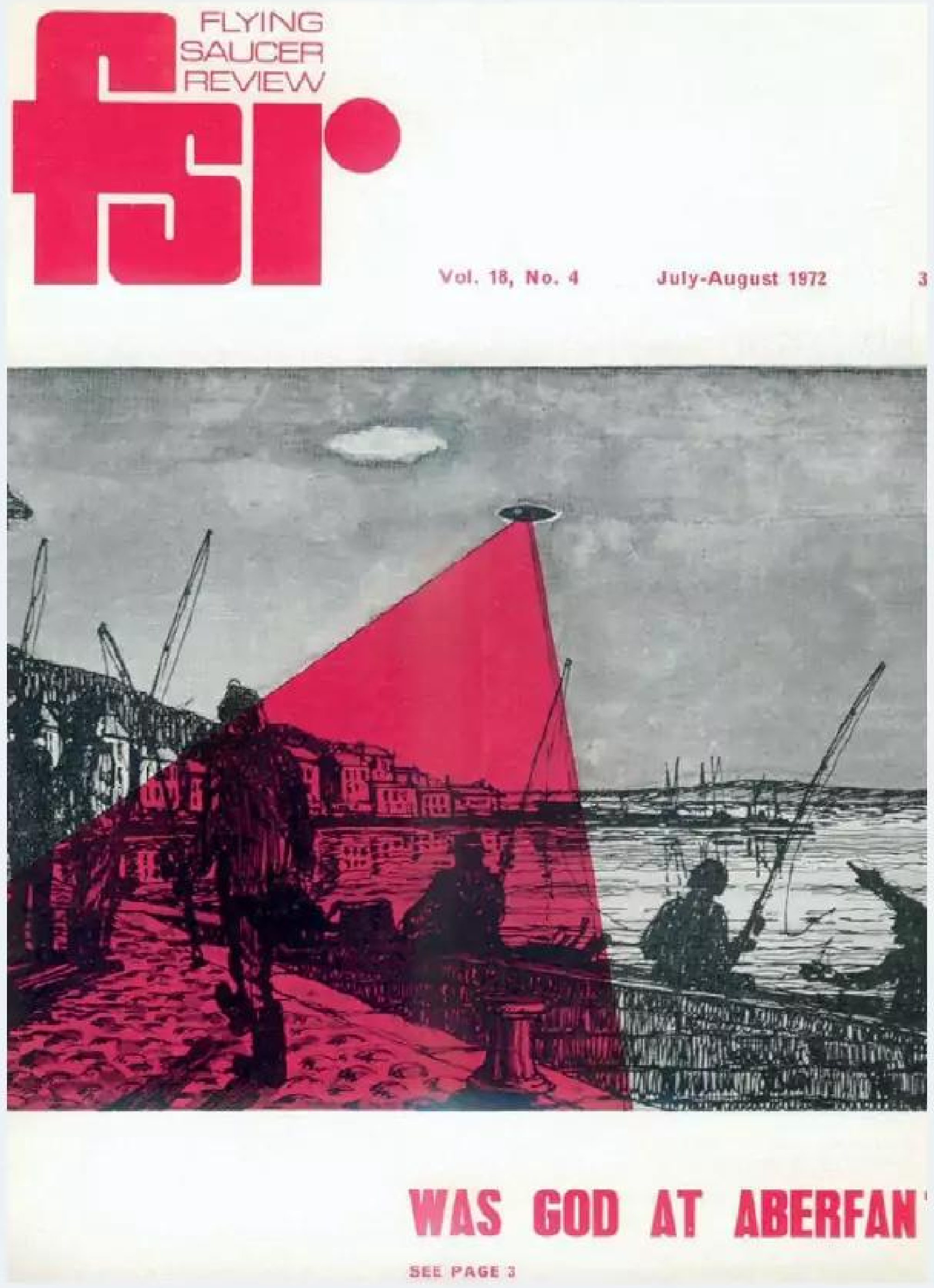
One of *Flying Saucer Review*'s most striking cover stories was about a cloud-like UFO that travelled from Tenby to Aberfan, South Wales, at 7pm on 8 October 1966, observed by Nessie researcher turned ufologist FW Holiday. He noted that this small, bluish, luminous cloud orbited slowly in a circle three times its own diameter. It blocked out background stars and some observers claimed they saw coloured lights, but Holiday only saw "a self-luminous lump of blue-grey cottonwool." About 10 minutes later, Holiday, along with about a dozen men and boys standing on the lifeboat slipway in Tenby harbour, were excited by the appearance of a dark object shining a brilliant ruby light at them as it emerged from the cloud. In a leisurely fashion the cloud moved eastwards and the dark object moved southwestwards.

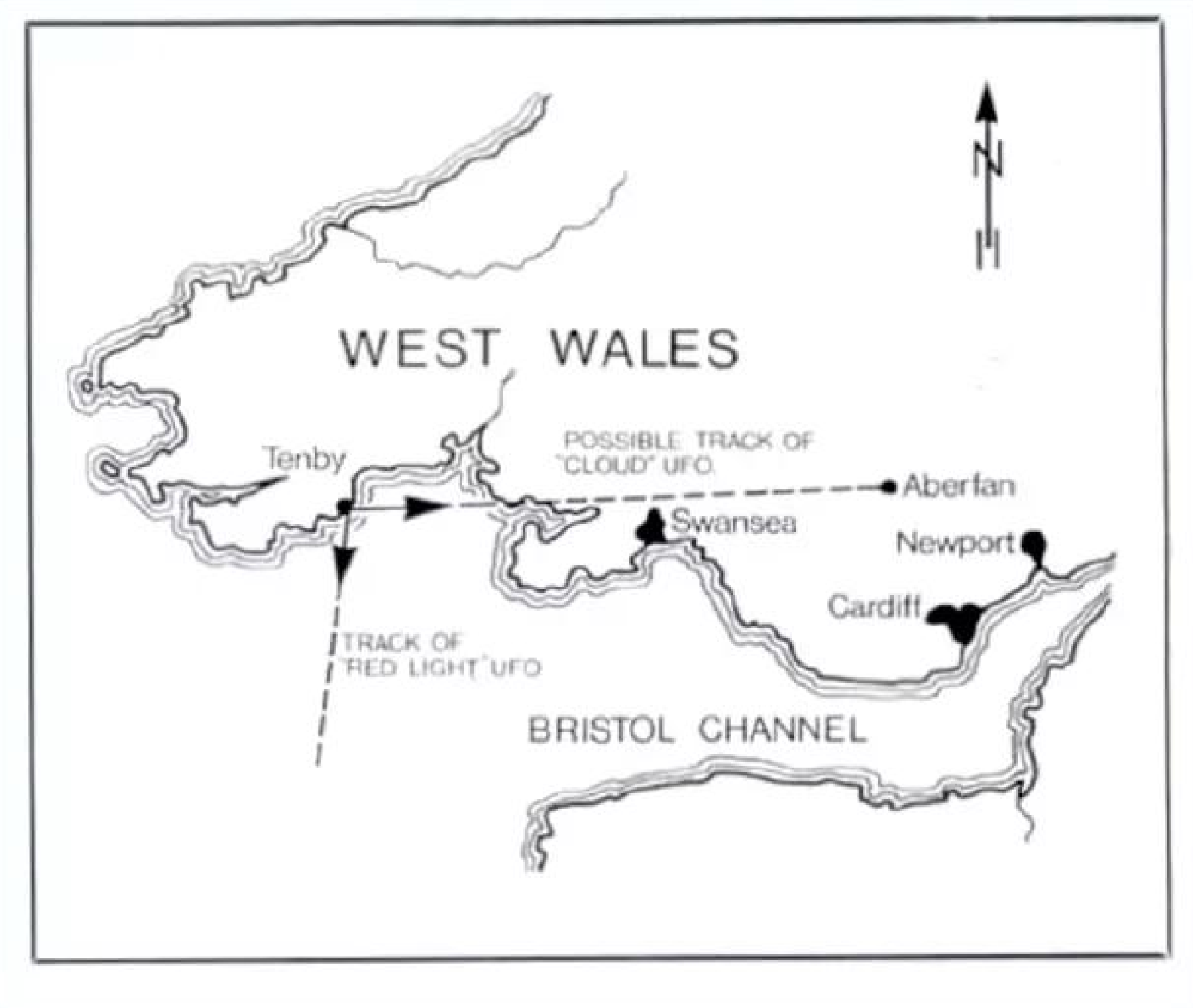
Until this sighting Holiday had not been interested in UFOs, but on checking-out the literature he discovered descriptions of cloud-cigar UFOs that left him convinced this was no helicopter, atmospheric cloud or balloon and that it was inexplicable by any similar explanations that he regarded as "the stock-in-trade of certain hardcase astronomers whose dogmatism was equalled only by their abject failure to explain the plainly discernible." Ouch!

Much later, he plotted the movement of the cloud on a map (shown at right) and found that if it had maintained the same course for 57 miles (92km) it would have arrived over Aberfan. The relevance is that 13 days after the sighting on 21 October 1966, a spoil-heap collapsed onto the town killing 116 children and 28 adults. Holiday asked: "Could such a traumatic disaster occur without casting a shadow before it?"

Holiday referenced Peter Fairley, science correspondent of the *Evening Standard*, who requested from his readers information about any possible precognition of the event. He received 22 replies that described vivid precognitive dreams, including a report by a local boy who on the day before the tragedy drew a picture of vehicles and miners on the slag heap, that he labelled "The End". That evening, the eight-year-old also saw "a man" outside his bathroom door. The next day he was one of the victims of the disaster. (For more on Aberfan, see **FT350:44-51**.)

Holiday argues that UFOs act "unintelligibly by current Western standards" and that we should consider whether "a timeless, all-knowing Cosmic Mind" is behind them. He thinks we should assume his UFO sighting and the precognitive dreams were engineered by "the entities" who foresaw this tragedy. We have to assume he means these are aliens who have the ability to tap into the cosmic mind, or are servants of it, with psychic and paranormal abilities.





This speculation led Charles Bowen, the editor of *Flying Saucer Review*, to give the article in the July-August 1972 edition, the headline: "Was God at Aberfan?" Even at the time I thought this was verging on the blasphemous and was not supported by the UFO report and dreams in the article. Furthermore, if God was at Aberfan, why didn't he stop the disaster?

The inspiration for this article seems to come from John Keel's promotion of the seven-foot-tall winged creature dubbed Mothman and sightings of UFOs and Men In Black around Point Pleasant, West Virginia. Keel, as well as other ufologists like Gray Barker, argued that these occurrences anticipated the collapse of the Silver Bridge on 15 December 1967, causing the death of 46 people (see **FT156:26-54**). David Clarke in his essay "A New Demonology: John Keel and *The Mothman Prophecies*" notes:

"Although he claimed to be an atheist, Keel did express belief in the existence of 'an occult or metaphysical system of control' that had existed since the dawn of mankind. He was never clear about the exact nature and purpose of this 'indefinable and certainly incomprehensible' system but was certain UFOs were part of it."

Clarke goes on to observe that Keel's prime legacy was the concept of 'ultraterrestrials', beings who have manipulated and controlled us throughout history. Did Keel really believe his own theories? Or, like many a fortean, did he merely use them as a literary device rather than anything based on tangible reality?

God, ultraterrestrials, spirits, demons, angels, aliens or non-terrestrial beings, call them what you will; the idea is that "they" operate tantalisingly beyond our understanding. Or is it that our own minds produce them?

As we have seen with the Aberfan and Silver Bridge disasters, we do like to attach meaning to such experiences. I can relate my own story of seeing a strange cloud that seemed to linger high above Plymouth Central Park at the end of November 2023.

As I was driving southwards on Mannamead Road on my way to visit my mother's care home, my wife and I saw this cloud and I remarked that it looked like a huge brain. After visiting my mother, we went for a walk in the park and the cloud was still there. A darker area of cloud looked like the brain stem, and the whole formation kept relatively intact for a few hours, and was completely different from the rest of the clouds in the sky.

At the time it crossed my mind that this was an ill-omen relating to my mother, and the fact that she did die two days later reinforced that idea. From a rational viewpoint, this is just an example of pareidolia, where our brains perceive a meaningful pattern where there is none; and the link with my mother's death is a further leap of imagination.

Thanks to Jeff Knox for reminding me of the God at Aberfan story. He posts a daily "Today in UFO History" at: www.facebook.com/jeff.knox.3910

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Ministerial affairs

JENNY RANDLES recalls the only time she managed to get a meeting at the Ministry of Defence

Among some UFO investigators, the Ministry of Defence is suspected to be a brick wall housed in a building in London, which appears to be one thing but in fact is another. I want to talk here about the only time I got to see the MoD in action, and why that event transformed my thinking on what really happened when UFO events were officially investigated.

It was late summer 1983, and I was living on the Wirral with my partner Paul, enjoying life in the home that we had bought together. I had just published my fifth book since 1979 – about Todmorden police officer Alan Godfrey's alleged abduction (**FT269:44-47, 270:46-49**). However, another case occurred over Christmas 1980 – just four weeks after the Godfrey encounter – and it had bothered me ever since. The incident was at a USAF base in East Anglia. Strange lights in the forest beyond the base were reported by both civilians and US airmen, while claims of UFO landings, marks left on the ground and radar contact from UK bases nearby gave strength to the evidence. This was, of course, the not-yet-famous Rendlesham Forest incident (**FT204:32-39**).

I was then director of investigations with the national group BUFORA, and my local co-ordinator who kept me updated on her investigation was Dot Street. She was working with a local friend, Brenda Butler, and they had visited the British commander who supervised what the USAF staff were doing. The many stories they heard locally made these two women sure something remarkable had happened.

Little did the three of us know in early 1981 where this would lead. Up to the summer of 1983 the three of us worked on a book we called *Sky Crash*, but were not finding it easy to find a publisher – not surprisingly, as there had been hardly any publicity about the events. Two years on, we still had no official confirmation of the case from the MoD. So I pursued a quiet letter-writing campaign to Pamela Titchmarsh, who was then in charge of the MoD's 'UFO desk'. She had told me the previous winter that the MoD were hoping to release UFO files to the public to defuse the idea anything extraordinary was hidden.

I asked for Rendlesham to be one of the first files released. I got a fairly trivial case from elsewhere. In April 1983 I did finally get a quote from the MoD on Rendlesham – which we discovered later was taken from the memo that deputy base commander Lt Col Charles Halt had submitted in January 1981 to the MoD. Weeks later, this report was released to UFO researcher Robert Todd in the USA, under their Freedom of Information Act, but not to anyone in the UK.

LEFT: Jenny (left) with Dot Street and Ray Boeche outside the MoD building.

COURTESY JENNY RANDLES

The MoD was receiving hundreds of cases a year, so some of them had to be more interesting

However, I was quickly sent a copy from the USA, and Brenda and Dot took it to show Halt, who confirmed it was real. We also knew there was a live tape recording made in the forest of the actual sighting. This had not been released, but we heard it not long afterwards via another source. Brenda and Dot also visited Squadron Leader Donald Moreland, the RAF's base commander. He was helpful and did add an intriguing fact: after the UFO 'departed', witnesses said the woodland floor where it had 'sat' or 'hovered' had glowed, as if some kind of radiation or illumination lingered. He also confirmed that the 'live' tape, made in the forest by USAF airmen, was real and how, on arrival back on base, one officer looked 'frightened'. However, the MoD seemed unaware of the tape.

Brenda, Dot and I took the decision to meet in London to talk to my publisher, hoping to persuade them to publish *Sky Crash*. They declined, though they later bought the UK paperback rights. We then headed for the main MoD building, and asked to talk to the UFO desk. We wanted to know if the Halt report was genuine, and if we would break the law by publishing it. We had a rather long wait with stern-looking guards watching over us, but Pam Titchmarsh arrived and agreed to talk. She confirmed the document was real and was the one she quoted in April. She could not offer any comment on what would happen if we chose to give the Halt memo to the UK press. I asked her about the radar report from the civilian base, where I had spoken with one of the controllers. She affirmed radar records from radar sites were checked, but nothing correlated with the sightings in Rendlesham Forest. She made clear that the Halt memo was the only testimony on record. It does not mention radar. How was she so sure about the radar facts? Pam said that by good fortune she had recently had a briefing on how to deal with radar evidence in UFO cases. They had no actual UFOs tracked on radar so the briefing used the three-year-old Rendlesham 'miss' as an illustration.

I asked Pam about the types of cases she got sent. She replied intriguingly: "We never get cases like the ones you tell us about. Not landings, close encounters, sightings of entities – and so on." She did not even know about the Alan Godfrey case – other than through the book I had just written – whereas we knew the MoD had interviewed him. She also told us that their task was to establish if a case had any 'defence implications' and if not they took it no further. "Why do you think your cases are so different from ours?" I asked. She had no idea. The MoD was receiving hundreds a year, so some of them surely had to be more interesting, if only by chance. But she could only repeat, "You tell us about these, we never get them." Perhaps the obvious reason is that those cases went somewhere else within the Ministry, and her job was to prove the MoD reacted to UFOs and could honestly say that most cases had little evidence. That she was unaware of the Godfrey case seemed to support that idea.

I offered to forward details of good cases. She replied that very likely she would not have resources, or permission, to investigate. She did add there were specialist staff to consult on things like physical traces, but Rendlesham was the first to need that in her time. I cited several major cases reported to the MoD. Once again her reply was "You tell us about them. We never see them." Which felt like an admission that this was a shop window with anything really interesting going on in the back room.

Soon after our meeting, Pam moved away from this part of the MoD.

THE BOLD STREET TIMESLIPS

After two of his friends independently reported weird temporal anomalies in Liverpool, ROB GANDY decided to investigate. But these were not isolated cases, says DR ANN WINSPER as she shares her files on this apparent hotspot for time slip experiences…

Bold Street in Liverpool must be one of the world's most famous locations for time slip events, with there being many examples on record.[1] For a number of years during the 1980s, on most weekdays I twice walked the full length of the street on my way to and from work – and to my disappointment I never experienced anything of the sort; and nothing has happened to me on any of the many occasions that I have been there since. Yet I am now able to tell of a curious coincidence involving two friends whom I have written about in *FT*. The first is David Barton (pseudonym) ("The Hauntings of David Barton", **FT371:40-44**) and the second is William Stevens (pseudonym) ("The Hauntings of William Stevens", **FT442:42-46**). These articles describe how they each experienced a range of inexplicable phenomena. Neither David nor William make any claims to being psychic and are simply bemused why so many odd things happen to them.

It was in 2022 that David first told me of an event that had happened to him on Bold Street many years ago; then in 2023 William described his equally strange visit to Liverpool. Neither was familiar with the city at the time. Indeed, William had never heard of Bold Street, and it was only by chance that we were later able to establish that he had been there. So there was a peculiar synchronicity for me of having my two friends, whom I had written about as 'haunted people', come to me independently to tell me about their possible time slips on Bold Street.

DAVID BARTON'S STORY

It was sometime in the early 1970s that David spotted a vacancy with the Computercar company in Liverpool, which would place him at around 20 years of age. The company used a computerised database of available cars and connected buyers with sellers, which was innovative for a time when computers were still very large and primitive compared to today. It ran adverts each evening during the commercial break in ITV's *Coronation Street*.

LEFT: Bold Street in the late 19th century. **FACING PAGE:** A similar view showing Bold Street today.

ADAMEDWARDSF2 / STOCKIMO / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

IT WAS A BRICK BUILDING WITH A "DICKENSIAN" APPEARANCE

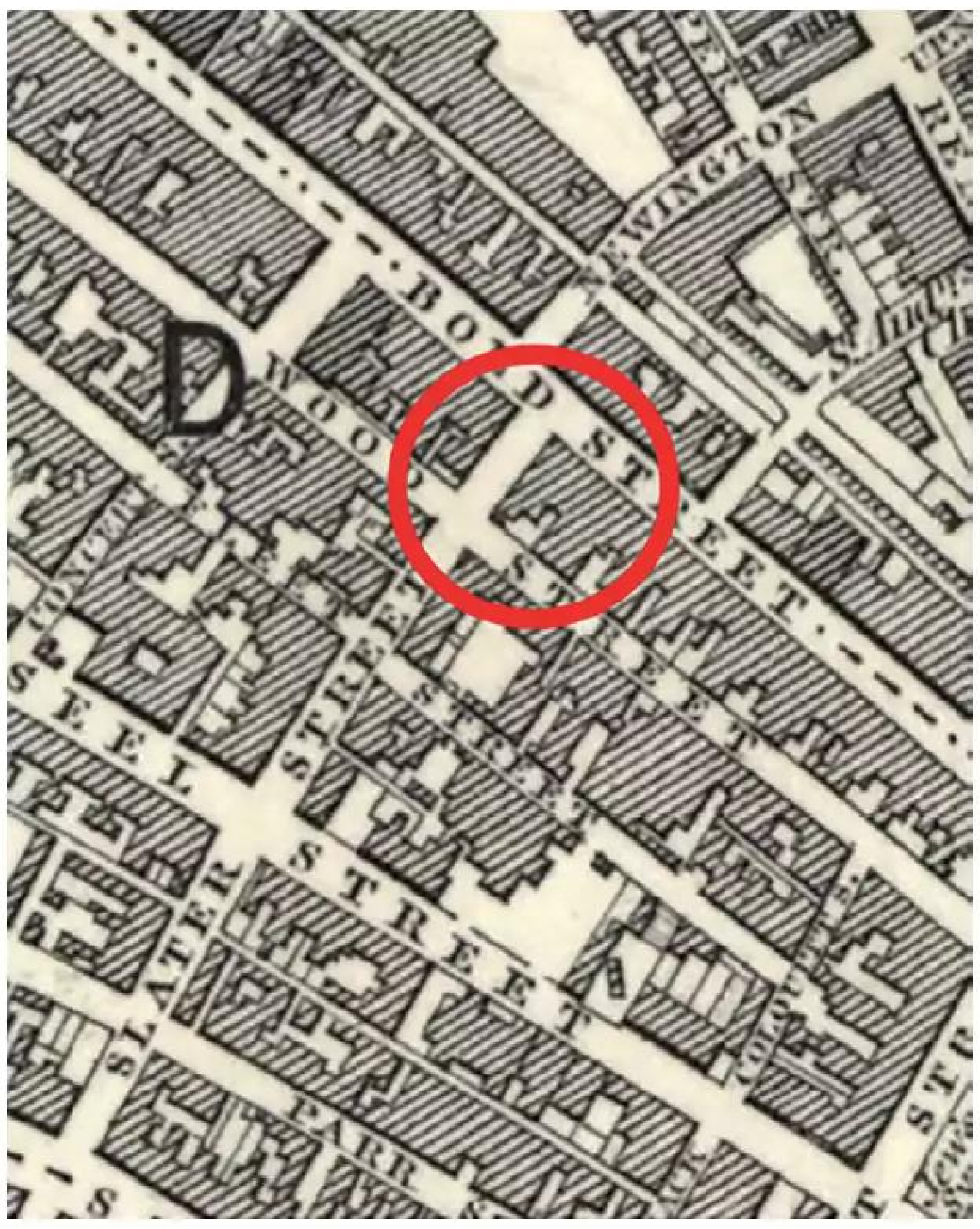
David was invited for an interview one evening at Computercar's offices above shops on Liverpool's Bold Street. Nowadays Bold Street is a hive of activity with shops, restaurants and pubs open until late into the night. However, back then it was quiet and mostly empty after 6pm. As a native of Birkdale, near Southport, David had rarely visited Liverpool and did not know the city very well. It was winter and the interview was scheduled for after 7pm. Hating to be late for any appointment, he had set off in good time and parked his car not far from the Liver Building. In the descending twilight, he made his way through the city centre to Bold Street and headed up to the far end, where the Computercar offices were based. Looking at his watch, he realised he was 20 minutes early, and decided to go for a short stroll back down Bold Street to kill time. He turned left into Slater Street, which is roughly 200 yards away. The shops were shut and there were no street lights, and his attention was drawn to the dim light emanating from one very small shop window about 20 yards ahead on his left.

It was a two-storey brick building which, he remembered, had a "Dickensian" appearance. The frontage of the shop was simply a plain window on the left and a plain door on the right, which opened straight on to the street. David doesn't recall any signage, but the shop was clearly shut. He had a look in the window, where he saw an array of violins, some in various states of disrepair; it was not a professional display and it all looked quite dusty. The inside was very spartan, and the orangey light was coming from the back of the shop. It struck him as being a workshop, and that someone must be there, although he did not actually see anyone. There wasn't a lot else to see, so he walked back to Bold Street and to the Computercar offices.

The interview went very well and David was offered the position of National Sales Manager with the growing company. Therefore, he attended a number of evening meetings over the following two weeks, and a couple of times he tried to find the enchanting little violin shop – but to no avail. No matter where he looked, he could not find it, which he found slightly frustrating, but nothing more. In the end, he had a better offer from another company and did not take things further with Computercar. Nevertheless, the image of

CENTRAL
Cafelatino
MASON
FOR
LESS
KINGS

SLATER STREET
WILLIAM GUINAN & Co LTD
WINE & SPIRIT MERCHANTS
BEER BOTTLERS



ABOVE LEFT: An old photograph of Slater Street, somewhat further down from where David would have been when he saw the strange vioilin shop. **ABOVE RIGHT:** A map showing Slater Street and Bold Street in Liverpool in the mid-19th century.

the shop remained fixed in his mind.

When David happened to mention this experience to me, the obvious question was: had he experienced a time slip? Perhaps further investigation might establish whether there had been a violin maker's or repairer's shop close to Bold Street at the beginning of the 1970s. If there was, then perhaps it was simply a case of David, unfamiliar with Liverpool, failing to retrace his steps and thus never finding the shop again. I contacted Liverpool Central Library, the local university libraries, and current local violin makers and repairers. And, lo and behold, there had been such a shop in the area! This was the premises of Laurence Naisby & Son, 110 Wood Street, which was right on the corner of Wood Street and Berry Street – approximately 150 yards from where the Computercar offices were located. Might this have been the shop? David is adamant that it wasn't, for several reasons: the premises are too large and do not fit his description (today they are the Krunchy Fried Chicken fast food restaurant); the shop that he saw was not on a corner; Berry Street is one of Liverpool's busiest thoroughfares and the building is right opposite the iconic St Luke's Bombed Out Church, which he would have been unlikely to forget. Scouring old photographs did not yield any images of potential sites on Slater Street or in the immediate area. David was at pains to stress that he would not have gone up and down small side-streets for fear of getting lost and being late for his interview.

In July 2022 we retraced his possible steps from over 50 years before. He could not be certain as to whether Computercar's offices were on the corner of Colquitt Street or Ropewalks Square, given the changes in the intervening years; but he *was* certain that he would not have walked down from the former and turned into the latter because they are so close together, and he could not have killed 20 minutes walking between them. Looking down Bold Street convinced him that it must have been Slater Street that he had turned into. The only other turning on the same side is into Concert Street/ Concert Square, further down, which has the old Music Hall building on the corner (now Coyote Ugly) – again, something that David would not have forgotten. As stated, he had kept the route of his walk as simple as possible so that he wouldn't get lost. There was no building on Slater Street we could see that matched his memory of the violin shop, even allowing for refurbishment and redecoration; and David was certain that he did not go as far as The Jacaranda music venue, where the Beatles started out, which was still active at that time and would have been hard to miss.

INSTEAD OF A LONG, STRAIGHT STREET THERE WAS A FLAT, OPEN AREA

The building that takes up the whole of the southeast side of Slater Street between Bold Street and Wood Street is, or rather was, a bank (it is now the Red Dog Saloon). It was built for Lloyd's in the 1920s using White Portland stone. The distance between Bold Street and Wood Street would fit in with how far up the street David said the shop was. The buildings there were very different in the mid-19th century, as can be inferred from within the red circle on the map shown. I have only been able to identify one photograph of the site from the late-19th century, which shows a row of shop fronts. The Goad Map of Liverpool for 1888, in Liverpool Central Library, highlighted that the whole area around the site was made up of shops, workshops and similar. Furthermore, local records for 1835-37, 1848-49 and 1890 listed all 'Musical Instrument Makers & Sellers' in Liverpool. There were two companies listed in each of these as being on Bold Street, but in all cases the proprietors were different and the addresses were different.[2] This suggests that there was a very dynamic situation in this type of business locally and a great deal of turnover. (There were several other such businesses in nearby streets for each set of records). It would be reasonable to assume that these Bold Street businesses would have had their repair workshops not too far away, and therefore Slater Street would be an ideal location.

David had said that the shop looked 'Dickensian' – so did he experience a time slip? The answer must be 'quite probably', as his account bears many of the hallmarks of such phenomena. The 'orangey light' is more consistent with 19th century gas and oil lighting, compared to electric lights around 1970, which generally gave off a white light. However, there is little that can be done to prove that this was the case – my research in Liverpool Central Library is suggestive, but nothing more. At the end of the day, like many fortean cases, this is a remembered experience from a witness who genuinely believes it happened to him.

WILLIAM STEVENS'S STORY

One weekend in the Summer of 2013 a top West Midlands Mod/Scooter band had booked into Liverpool's famous Parr Street Studios to make some recordings. William, who was in his late 40s at the time, is a Mod and a keen collector of 1960s music. Along with another friend of the band, he was invited to accompany them on the trip. After an overnight stay at the Sir Thomas Hotel, the last tracks were to be put down on the Sunday before they headed home. William was not involved in the sessions, and actually found the studios quite boring;

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ABOVE LEFT: Liverpool's Parr Studios, from where William Stevens set out on his inadvertant journey into the past. **ABOVE RIGHT:** The now departed Hairy Records, reputedly the UK's oldest record store, on Bold Street; this is where William 'came to' following his time slip experience.

so he took the opportunity to go back to the hotel and have a look around a city he was not very familiar with.

It was roughly 1.30pm on a fine day when William found himself at the top of a street parallel to and close by Parr Street. This was where Hairy Records was located; reputedly the UK's oldest record shop and a place where he could happily browse for a while. As he walked down the street towards the store, the mild headache he had developed worsened, and he realised that he was going to have a full-blown migraine. His instinctive reaction in these circumstances has always been to look down at his feet. But after a few moments, when he looked up again, he saw that everything had changed. Instead of a long, straight street there was a flat, open area where houses had been and children were playing. William remembers that some of them had a go-kart. Across the roads on either side were long rows of houses. In the distance he recalls being aware of ships.

To his right, across the street, were two middle-aged women having a chat on the doorsteps of their houses, wearing pinafores and carrying brushes. He assumed they were cleaning their doorsteps. As he watched, a couple of middle-aged men wearing late-1940s or early-1950s mackintoshes and trilbies walked up the street past the women. The two men then both stopped and looked strangely at William before moving on. At this point his migraine got even more severe and he had a nosebleed; it was as if everything was under intense pressure. It was so bad that he felt that if he carried on down the street things would get worse, so he turned around.

Suddenly, somehow, everything returned to normal and William found himself leaning on the wall by Hairy Records. He realised that what had happened was very strange, but he thought the whole affair had taken 10-15 minutes. It was then that his friend came around the corner and asked him where the hell he had been, because everyone had been looking all over for him. The time was approximately 7.30pm. His friend had been trying to call William on his mobile phone all afternoon, but when William checked his phone he saw that the battery had completely drained. Indeed, his mum had been trying to call him all afternoon as well, to no avail. William felt and looked awful, and so his friend shepherded him back to where the car was waiting on Parr Street. William was shoved into the back seat where he fell asleep. He did not wake up until he was dropped off outside his house in the West Midlands and he remembers absolutely nothing of the journey.

So where did William have this bizarre experience? It was at the top of Bold Street. Parr Street runs parallel to Bold Street, separated by Wood Street and Seel Street and linked by both Colquitt Street and Slater Street. Until we had our conversation about the incident, William had never even heard about Bold Street, and it was only when I showed him a photo of Hairy Records that he was able to confirm where he had been. This is a very intriguing case, because not only does it appear that William had a 'classic' time slip, where he found himself witnessing and interacting with a scene from the past, but there is also the 'missing time' element; what he thought had been 10-15 minutes was at least six hours. And exactly where had William physically been? By his own admission, he didn't move very far during the episode, and his friend had been frantically looking around the area for him for many hours; the top of Bold Street, where Hairy Records was located, is an open area with clear views, and William is not someone you would easily miss! Had he become invisible, or been transported to another dimension? We will never know, but William's experience is another fascinating contribution to the Bold Street timeslip lore.

CONCLUSIONS

I am pleased to be able to add David's and William's experiences to the growing panoply of Bold Street time slips, subject to the usual caveats. They were quite different, but each shared some characteristics with established Bold Street cases. What is a 'time slip', and where did William go? What he described sounds like an area that had been bombed during WWII (which Liverpool was, extensively) and then cleared, but the description is suggestive of streets nearer to the docks. The fact that what he thought was a short period of time was in fact several hours might be seen to have parallels with stories of people who have visited fairyland, where an hour there could be months or even years back home. But the curious coincidence for me is the fact that the two people about whom I have written *FT* articles, who I would describe as 'haunted people', both had time slip-type experiences on Bold Street when neither had been there before. Might it be that other people who have reported similar experiences on and around Bold Street are also prone to a personal history of strangeness? It's not something that I can investigate, but it is an interesting question. Whatever the case, it is highly likely that Bold Street time slips will continue to be reported – accompanied by much conjecture about their possible causes.

NOTES

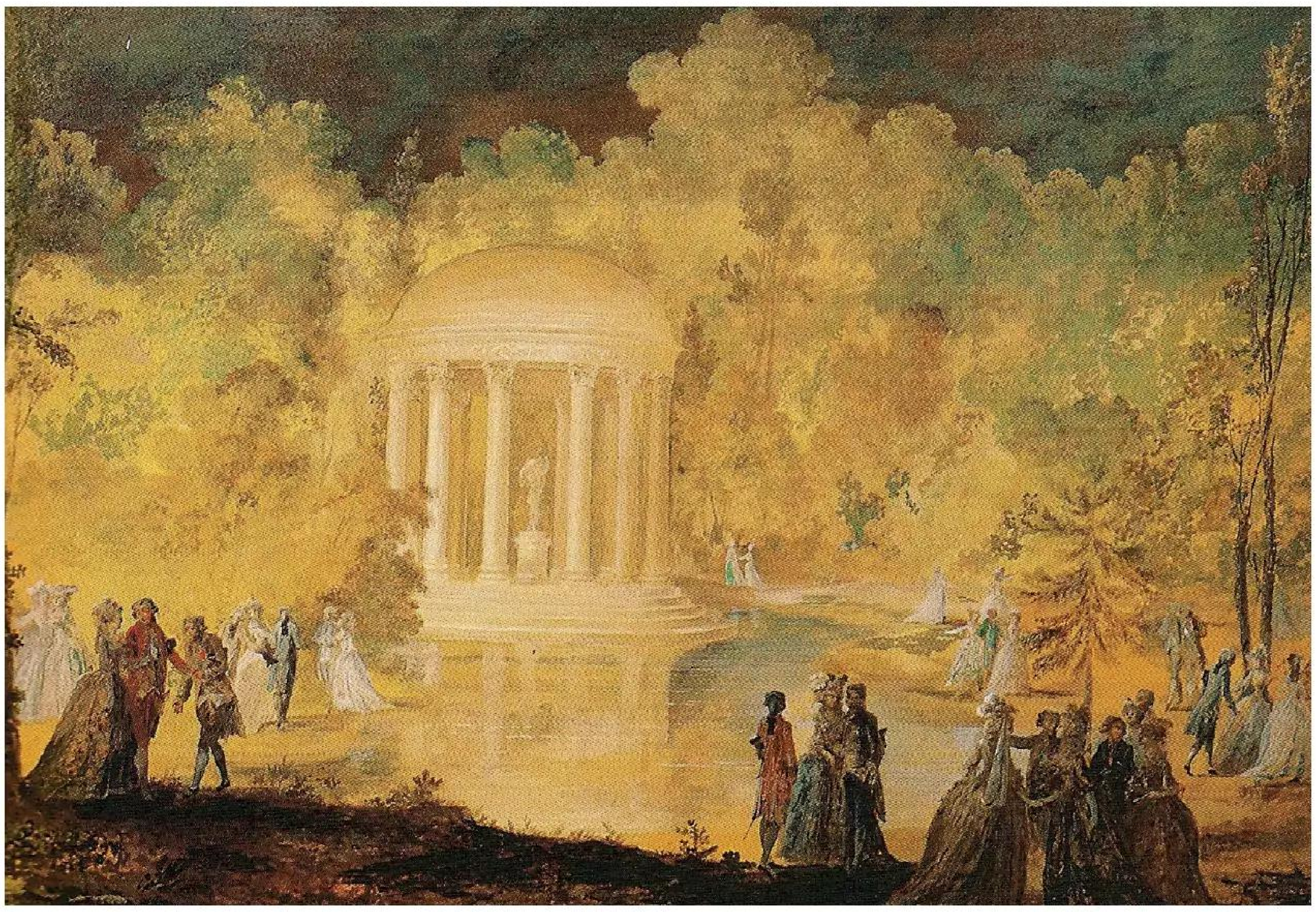
1 See **FT126:9**, **382:38-4**3. Also: www.parascience.org.uk/PDFs/Time%20Slips.pdf and https://discover.hubpages.com/religion-philosophy/The-Liverpool-Time-Slips-The-True-Story-Of-Mysterious-Occurences-In-Bold-Street. For an ASSAP webinar by Dr Ann Winsper, see www.youtube.com/watch?v=qNfvraEoebE&list=PLqK4OplbUdRMdhvRlwnXYVYsrDVd1olhq&index=6

2 In 1848-49 a William P Dreaper was at 56 Bold Street and in 1890 WH & GH Dreaper were at 96 Bold Street, which suggests a family connection.

ROB GANDY is a Visiting Professor at Liverpool Business School, Liverpool John Moores University and a regular FT contributor.

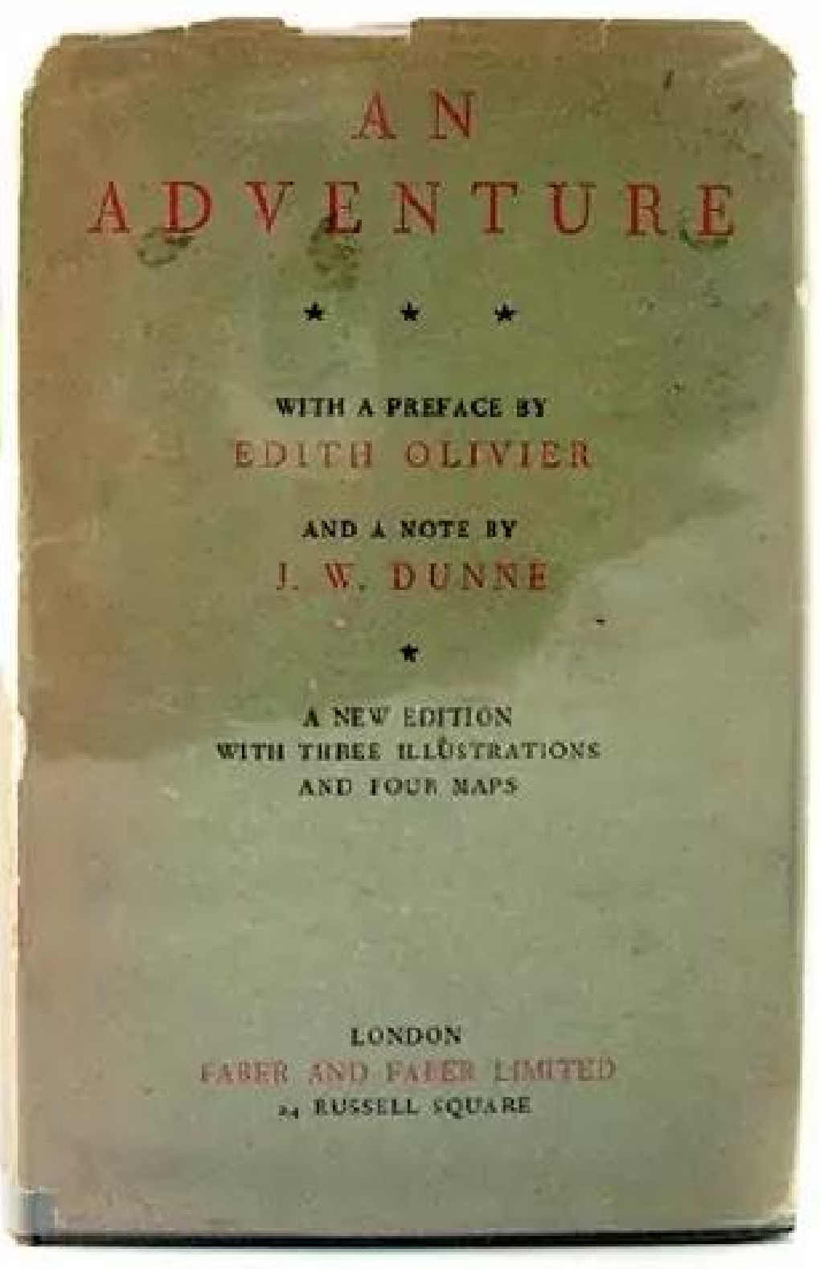
Slipping Through Time

Dr Ann Winsper provides an anatomy of time slips and asks how we might attempt to explain them



ABOVE: An 18th century painting of the Petit Trianon, where Moberly and Jourdain believed they had seen Marie Antoinette. **BELOW:** *An Adventure*, Moberly and Jourdain's account of their Versailles time slip. **FACING PAGE:** Ray Allan, seen here with Lord Charles, experienced a time slip involving a phsyical object.

Slips in time have been used as plot devices in fiction for many years. I still recall reading *Tom's Secret Garden* as a child, with its protagonist slipping into a Victorian garden at night. And who can forget the hilarious film version of *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*, based on the 1889 book by Mark Twain, complete with Bing Crosby musical numbers? More recently, the 1990s sitcom *Goodnight Sweetheart* has gained a cult following, with its adventures of a television repairman who finds a portal in time back to the 1940s. Each of these involves a person apparently travelling back in time to a past era, either spontaneously or through some sort of portal.



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But surely all this is fiction? After all, currently physics has no testable explanation for the possibility of travelling in time (excepting quantum elemental particles, of course).

THE VERSAILLES TIME SLIP

In 1901, Charlotte Anne Moberly and Eleanor Jourdain, Principal and Vice-Principal of St Hugh's College for Young Women in Oxford, apparently had an incredible experience whilst visiting the gardens at the Palace of Versailles. According to *An Adventure*, a book they published in 1911 under the pseudonyms of Morison and Lamont,[1] they inadvertently travelled back in time to the late 1700s. Moberly describes "an extraordinary depression" coming over her, with everything appearing unnatural and lifeless, with Jourdain corroborating the feelings of heavy dreaminess and an impression of something "uncanny and fear inspiring". Both women described encounters with people along the way, including a man with a pock-marked face, a red-faced man shouting at them to not follow the path they were on but rather to pass another way, and a young boy directing them to the entrance of the Petit Trianon. Moberly described seeing a middle-aged lady with fair hair wearing a white hat and a light summer dress. It later transpired that Jourdain did not see this lady. The two women compared notes and carried out

THE TWO WOMEN INADVERTENTLY TRAVELLED BACK TO THE LATE 1700s

THE BOLD STREET FILES

Dr Ann Winsper shares some of the time slip cases she has collected

While time slips are reported from all over the world, there is one place where they are reported almost more than all the others put together. This is Bold Street in Liverpool. Bold Street was originally one of the city's ropewalks, the length being used to measure rope for sailing ships. The city merchants had houses on the street, then when the suburbs became more attractive to them, the area was turned over to shops. It was described as the Bond Street of the North due to the high end goods that were sold there.

The street is rich in history: the Lyceum building was England's first subscription library and at the top of the road is St Luke's Church, or the Bombed-Out Church as it is commonly known, having been bombed in the Blitz. With such a rich history, maybe it's no surprise that so many slips are reported from the area; but what marks it out from similar streets in other cities is still a mystery.

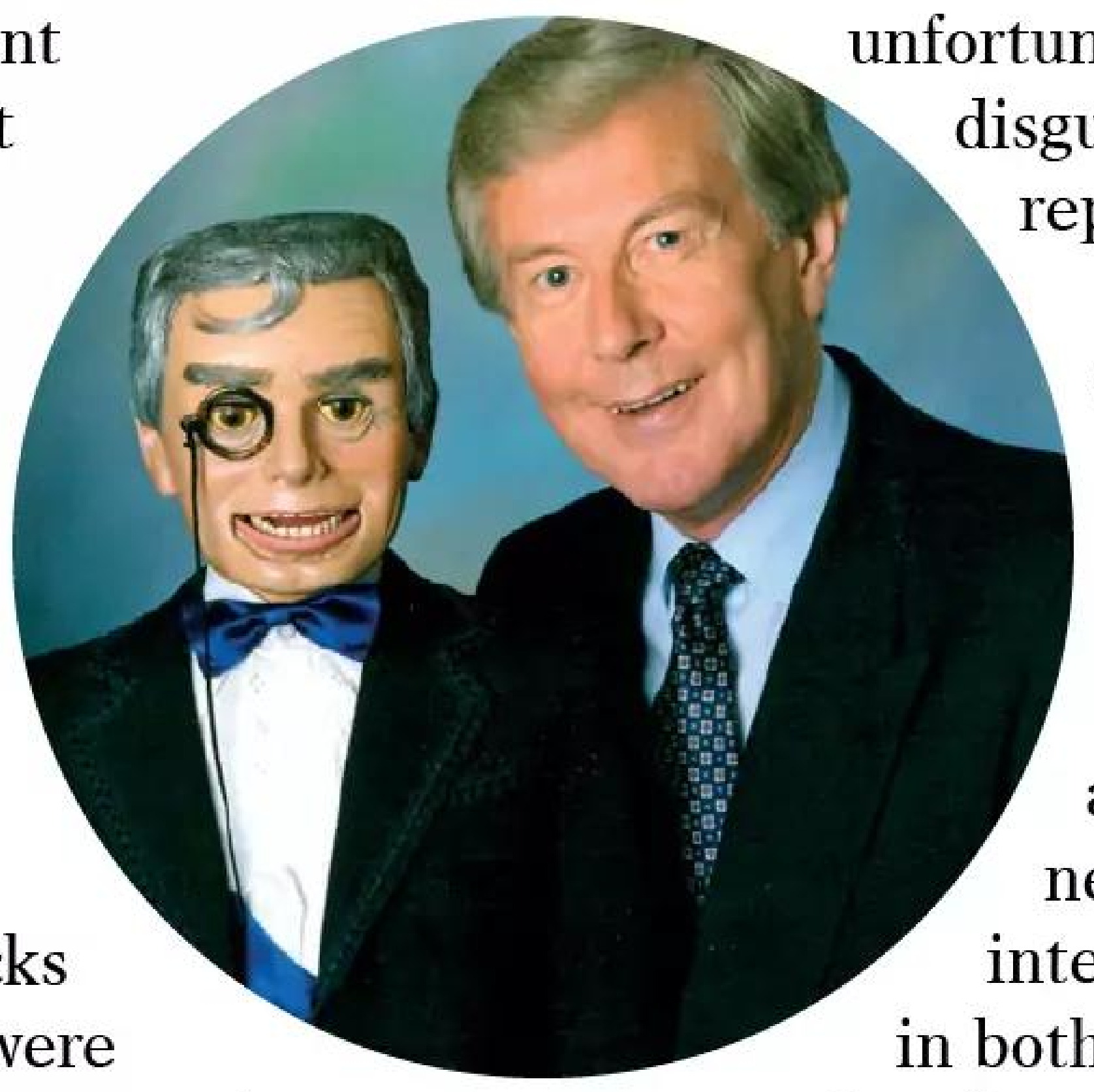
● Jamie used to work in Bold Street so knew the area well. One Saturday he was going into town to meet his wife, but as he walked onto Bold Street he noticed that a closed-down shop, Collinsons, appeared to have reopened as the windows were once again full of shoes and hats. He also noticed that the model shop appeared to have moved over to the other side of the road, where it had been some years before. He was surprised to note that the cars on the street were old-fashioned, but appeared shiny and new, and that the shoppers appeared to be wearing fashions from 10-15 years earlier. The street appeared unusually quiet, and the usual street sounds were muted. He met his wife outside the bank on Hanover Street. When they came back onto Bold Street, he was surprised to see that everything had returned to normal – the empty shops were again empty and the model shop was back where it had been a few days before.

some research on the grounds and the royal party. They had also decided that the area was haunted, and were informed of stories telling how Marie Antoinette appeared in ghostly form on certain days of the year. At this point, Moberly suggested that the female figure she had seen was in fact Marie Antoinette.

The case was investigated by the Society for Psychical Research, with Mrs Sidgwick stating: "It does not seem to us that, on the evidence before us, there is sufficient ground for supposing anything supernormal to have occurred at all." Lucille Iremonger in her 1957 book[2] reaches an indecisive conclusion, Coleman in his 1988 book[3] comes down on the sceptical side, while Andrew MacKenzie in his 1997 book[4] decides that the experience was due to an imprint on the area which triggered a hallucination in the ladies. None of the explanations put forward consider an actual slip through time. (For more, see **FT278:30-35**.)

THE KERSEY TIME SLIP

One autumn in 1957 three Royal Navy trainees approached the village of Kersey in Suffolk during a training exercise. They had navigated to the village using fields. They could see the church tower and could hear the church bells ringing. Suddenly the church bells stopped, and the road appeared to be a small lane with ancient houses. They noticed that not only had the bells stopped ringing, but there was complete silence, which was accompanied by a feeling of depression. They sat for around 10 minutes by the side of a bridge over a stream which crossed the road. They could not see the church at all. There were ducks beside the stream, but they were motionless and silent. Nothing moved; even the leaves on the trees were still, and later one of the group, on being told about the flat and lifeless description of Versailles, said that described the experience perfectly. They spotted a butcher's shop, but on looking in there were no tables or counters, and only some green ox carcasses. None of the houses appeared to have anything inside them. The young men also recalled that the season appeared to have changed from autumn to spring. They hurried out of the lane, and suddenly the church bells were sounding again and smoke started rising from the chimneys of the houses.



Mackenzie suggests that the three youths were in a state of hallucination while they were in the village, and that while they were in this state they were unable to see the people or the scenery of the present day – but present-day people had been able to see the youths. One of the experiencers did say that he had had a feeling of being observed by unseen watchers, and this explanation may account for that. (For more, see **FT282:16-17**.)

BOLD STREET AND BEYOND

These experiences seem to be explicable, either through normal means (misperceptions, hallucinations, false memory), or through some form of hallucination triggered by something present in the environment. They also seem to be unusual experiences, in the sense that they do not occur frequently. However, there is a growing amount of evidence that these experiences are not only not rare, but may actually be quite common.

I have received a surprising number of accounts of this kind going back over the last 20 years or so. A number of them report the same things as in the famous examples above: the light appears to change, everything goes quiet or even completely silent, and the scene appears to change to one of the past. Is this an example of a common hallucinatory experience, or is there actually some kind of slip in time occurring? Following a programme I was involved in on BBC Radio Merseyside some 20 years ago, I became aware of a number of reports coming from one area in Liverpool – Bold Street. The number of reports coming from this very specific location far outweighed those from other areas of the country, and continues to do so today. The waters have been muddied slightly by a number of semi-fictional stories in local media, which unfortunately have only served to disguise a number of compelling reports from the area.

Most of the reports are subjective and cannot be proven either way. However, there are a surprising number of examples where not only are there multiple witnesses, but there have been interactions between people in both apparent time periods, and exchange of physical objects. One famous case was recalled by Ray Allen, best known for his performances with his puppet sidekick Lord Charles.[5] Allen recalled visiting Chesterfield for the first time. As soon as the train had arrived, he and a companion decided to go and buy some cigarettes. Despite not having been to the town before, Allen said he was aware of a small shop nearby. Both men visited the shop where they were served by an old woman. He was unable to explain how he knew where the shop was, not having visited the town before. A short time later both men visited the shop again, only to find a derelict building in its place. The shop turned out to have been closed for years, and the old woman had been dead for some time. They still had the cigarettes they had bought. This is not an isolated incident, there have been a number of reports of exchange of objects.

There is some crossover here with ghost stories; in fact, in a lot of cases the only defining factor seems to be that ghosts are usually distinct figures, whereas with time slips the whole background changes. There

- Shaun had a lady friend who was very much a paranormal sceptic. She was working in Liverpool city centre, and on this particular day she decided to sit on a bench opposite Waterstones book shop in Bold Street. As she sat down she noticed that the sunlight suddenly appeared to be duller; additionally, the street appeared to be very quiet, unusual for a lunchtime. She sat down on the bench next to a very smartly dressed man and chatted to him while eating her sandwich. As they talked, she thought to herself that the man appeared to be dressed in 1950s clothing. He asked her a question, and as she replied she leaned forward to put her sandwich wrapper in the bin. As she straightened up, she was astonished to realise that the man had disappeared. She scanned the area for him, but could not see him anywhere, but he could not have run away in the few seconds she took her eyes off him. At the same instant the Sun returned to its previous brightness and the area was once again crowded with people.

- John was walking down the ramp that leads from Bold Street into Central Station. He looked to his right and noticed a café/coffee shop that he had not seen before. He thought it odd as it had not been there a few days before, and no one had been working on the shop either. Even stranger, everyone in the shop and the few people sitting outside were dressed in old fashioned clothes – looking back, John thought they were fashions from the early 1900s. The women were wearing large hats and looked out of place. John thought maybe something was being filmed, or the café was holding an event. He glanced ahead to make sure he wasn't about to walk into someone then looked back at the café: it was was no longer there, and while John wishes he had gone over to the café to speak to the people he saw, he also recalls being scared and having a feeling that something was very wrong.

- James was looking for an engagement ring for his partner. He headed for an independent jeweller he knew was at the top of Bold Street. He was standing outside the shop, looking at the rings in the window, when he lifted his head. He was surprised to see the reflection of an old fashioned van in the window; it was a cream colour and had ornate writing and designs on the side. He turned around to look and saw it driving slowly up the road. He recalled the tyres being very loud on the road surface. As he watched it go up the street he realised that there was a strange haze in the air, there were shops he didn't recognise and people's attire and cars appeared unfamiliar. Everything went silent and, feeling scared, James turned back to face the jeweller's window. Instantly, sounds returned to normal and the reflection in the window showed the street as it should be. James tried to recreate the experience by looking at the reflection again and again, but nothing unusual happened.

- Sam was visiting a gaming shop situated to the right of the entrance to Central Station that leads onto Bold Street. While standing on the ramp from the station, he suddenly realised that his friend appeared to have vanished. He walked up the ramp towards Bold Street, expecting that his friend would be at the top. The weather seemed to have completely changed from a bright sunny day to a dark and damp one. Feeling a bit freaked out, he turned back towards the station, only to discover his friend in exactly the same place from which he had apparently vanished. The friend was very angry, saying he had been standing there for ages wondering where Sam had got to.

- Paul was a student on his way to Liverpool Community College one morning. Around 8.30am he was about to cross Ranelagh Street/Hanover Street, ready to walk up Bold Street. It was cold and raining and so he was looking down at the pavement because he had no umbrella or hood. He then heard the sound of a horse and cart, and raised his head to see a very old horse and cart crossing his path with passengers dressed in Victorian-style dress; the surroundings were also different, and consistent with that era. He immediately assumed he had stumbled into a filming location, and so hurried a little bit up Bold Street, again looking at the ground because of the weather. When he reached the steps on the left, he paused and looked back. But everything appeared normal again and there was no sign of the horse and cart or period clothing and surroundings, and certainly no film crew.

The names used in the above reports are pseudonyms

ABOVE: The Suffolk village of Kersey, where in 1957 three Royal Naval trainees experienced a time slip.

is one category of time slip that differs from ghost experiences, and that is the 'forward time slip'. This is much less common than the backward variety, and obviously we have no historical records for the future to compare them to. Interestingly, most of these forward time slips are reported by pilots who see landmarks and airfields appearing as futuristic.

THE PHYSICS OF TIME SLIPS

You might think that it is unlikely that you would ever experience a time slip, however they don't necessarily have to be big or dramatic. I have a large file of smaller experiences which I call "disappearing cars and reappearing people" where things happen exactly as described – cars are seen to approach then disappear into thin air; people have pulled out onto busy roads that have suddenly become devoid of vehicles, only for all the cars to reappear seconds later with none of the collisions that might be expected; people have passed by other pedestrians who were very distinctive, only to pass by them again minutes later when it is impossible that they could have done so.

It is observed that time appears to flow in one direction only, and of course different people can perceive the passage of time in different ways depending on conditions, but are there other explanations? Are there such things as wormholes in spacetime? Theoretically, these could exist: a wormhole would be unstable and collapse under its own gravity in a short period of time, but this might actually support the argument for time slips given that these events tend to be short and localised. However, we would expect if a person travelled through a wormhole they would not recall the time spent within it, and obviously witnesses *do* recall the strange time. Physics describes how time dilation exists, but this is on a massive scale and only occurs under high speeds or stronger gravity, and people or vehicles do not generally travel near the speed of light, and stronger gravity would be instantly noticed, not just by the percipient.

The concept of a multiverse might allow for these strange time anomalies, but of course there is no proof that a multiverse can exist except theoretically; and if there is an infinite number of universes, how are people slipping between them without noticing?

As yet, we have no explanation for these slips in time, certainly a number may be accounted for as hallucinations and misperceptions, but by no means all of them can be explained this way. Our best hope of finding more information is for witnesses to follow accepted procedures for reporting anomalous experiences following a time slip – do not discuss with other witnesses, write down immediately all the circumstances, including psychological (mood), meteorological, any other percipients, previous knowledge of the area and any other pertinent information. And ideally contact me so that I can add the experience to the database and try and find an explanation for these strange anomalies in time.

NOTES

1 Elizabeth Morison & Frances Lamont, An Adventure, MacMillan and Co., 1911.

2 Lucille Iremonger, *The Ghosts of Versailles*, Faber & Faber, 1957.

3 CAE Moberly and EF Jourdain, ed. Michael H Coleman, *The Ghosts of the Trianon*, Aquarian Press, 1988.

4 Andrew MacKenzie, *Adventures in Time*, The Athlone Press, 1997.

5 *Psychic News*, 31 Dec 1988, p.2.

DR ANN WINSPER is a psychical phenomenologist and independent researcher who specialises in time slips and EVP experiences. She has a Facebook page specialising in time slip experiences: www.facebook.com/groups/timeslips/

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Opening the Box of Delights

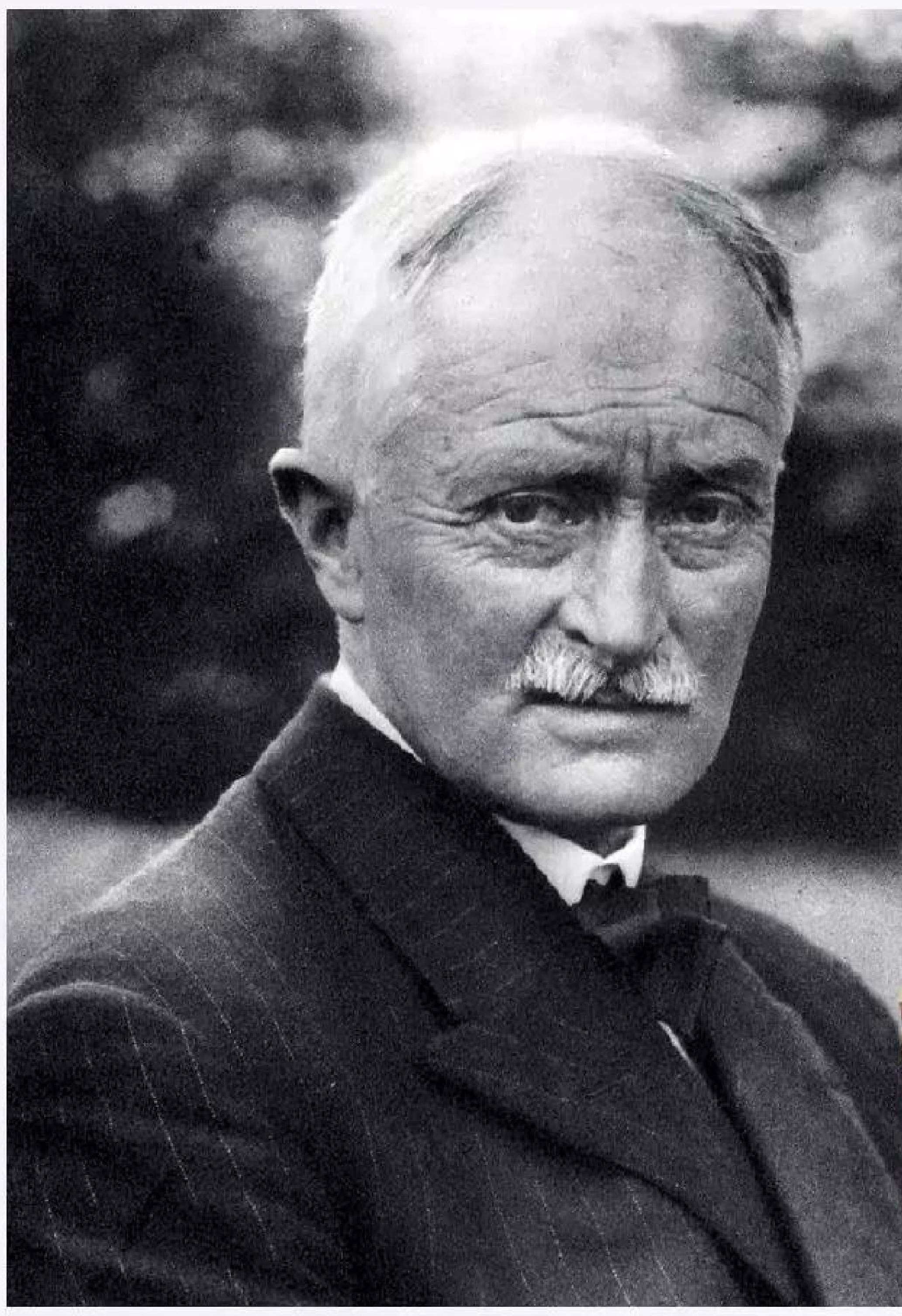
In 1984, the BBC's ambitious adaptation of John Masefield's *The Box of Delights* became a highlight of the Christmas TV schedules. As the uncanny fantasy classic turns 40, **LISA GLEDHILL** meets the viewers who remain captured by its magic, while **BOB FISCHER** unwraps a very special Christmas box – an anniversary Blu-ray release that includes a new feature-length documentary on the making of the series.

Forty years ago, millions of children gazed into a magical box and were transported to a world of talking animals, flying cars and ancient battles. They were watching the BBC's adaptation of *The Box of Delights* by John Masefield, a head-spinning mashup of Thirties pulp crime fiction and classic fantasy. Child-hero Kay Harker must protect a powerful device created by a mediæval sage from evil sorcerer Abner Brown and his gang of jewel thieves masquerading as clergymen. The action culminates on Christmas Eve, with snowstorms, flying sleighs and carols.

This was groundbreaking stuff for TV in 1984, making use of the very latest multi-camera video effects to bring the fantasy to life. It starred theatrical heavyweight Robert Stephens as sinister Abner Brown with former *Doctor Who* Patrick Troughton as Cole Hawlings, the mysterious, ageless traveller with a magic box that can go back through time. With a budget of £1 million, it was the most expensive children's TV drama to date and a highlight of that year's Christmas line-up.

Of course, the BBC wanted a good return on its investment, so the show was heavily promoted. There were trailers and posters, and features about it on other shows including *Pebble Mill* and *Blue Peter*. It was on the cover of *The Radio Times* – a rare honour for a children's show at that time. The BBC even backed the publication of a new edition of Masefield's book, strategically abridged to bring it more in line with the TV adaptation. The six-part series went down well, winning three BAFTAs and an RTS award. It was repeated in 1986 and released on VHS.

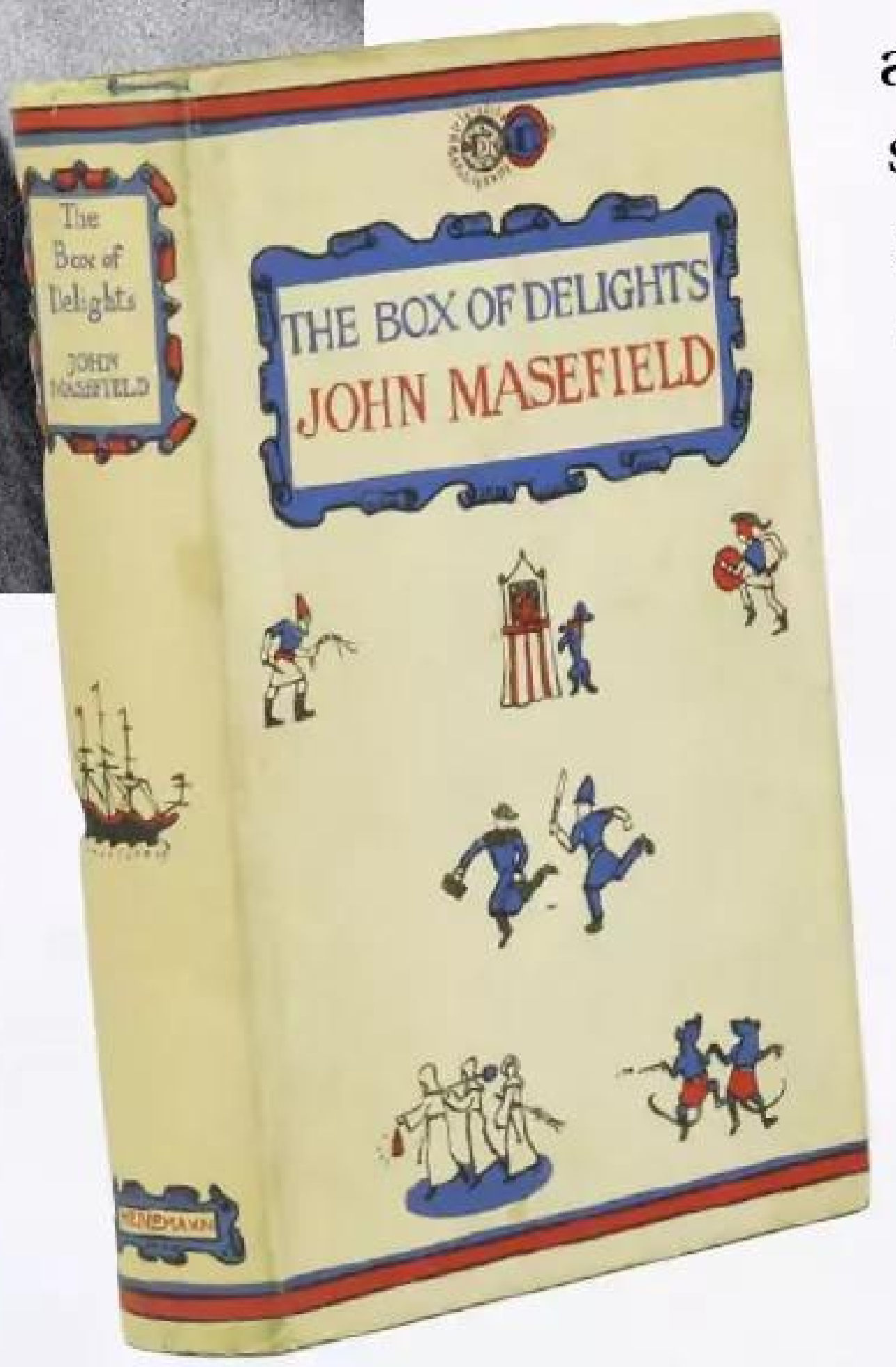
And then, it should have faded gently into the background, superseded by new and ever more technically sophisticated children's shows, becoming just another hazy memory for the Haunted Generation, like *The Phoenix and the Carpet* or *Chocky*. But that's not what happened. Instead, in thousands of homes across the country each Christmas, people dusted off their VHS tapes for a festive return to the fictional town of Condicote – to a world of buttered eggs and black magic where Herne the Hunter haunts the wildwood and where the wolves are running. A 2004 DVD release came just in time to replace worn-out tapes and remind now-adult viewers of that special winter back in 1984. Later, the explosion of social media allowed those people to find each other and the online community of "Boxers" burst into life.



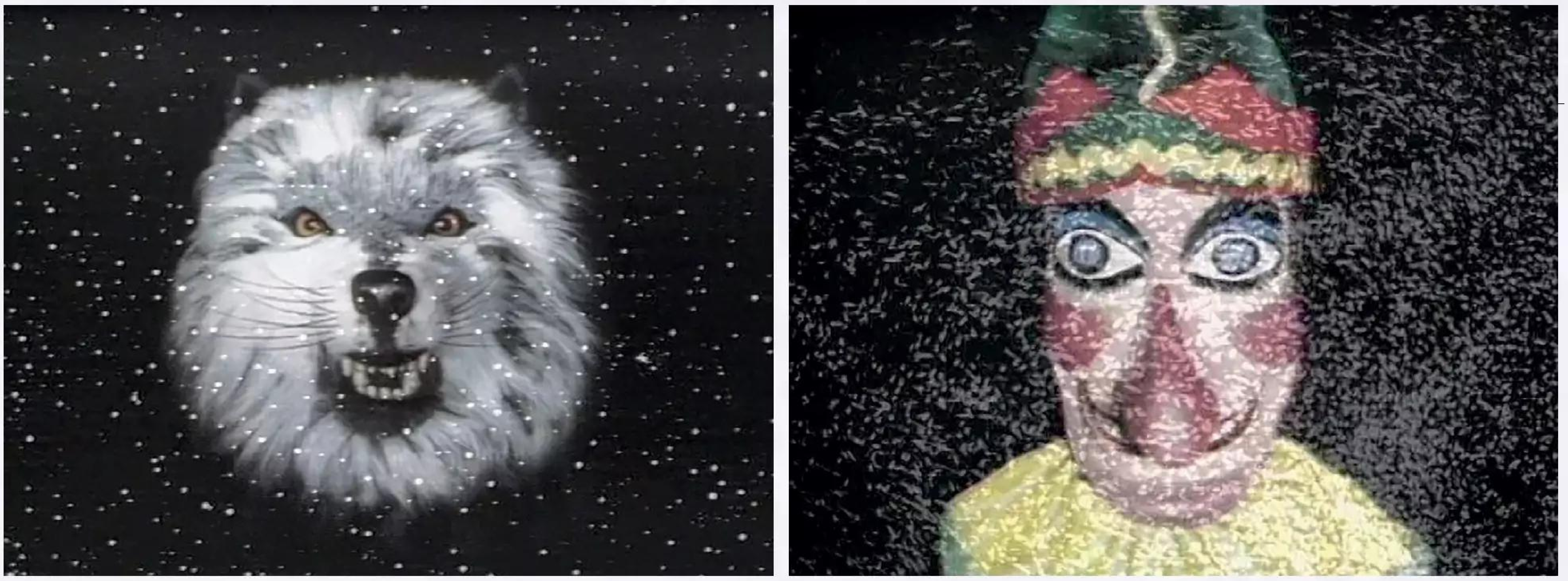
"I HAD AN IMAGE OF KIDS FLYING AND A LITTLE PUNCH AND JUDY MAN AND A WOLF"

THE BOX AND THE BEEB

Today on Facebook the main *Box of Delights Appreciation Society* group has more than 3,000 members, including actors and production personnel involved with the series, and there are other smaller fan groups. Over on X (Twitter) you can go one better and talk to the book's characters 'in person'. Abner Brown offers satirical takes on current affairs, sometimes clashing with plucky young Kay Harker or swapping banter with the Inspector of Condicote police. Meanwhile on Etsy, there's an entire cottage industry creating art, textiles, jewellery and other beautiful things inspired by *The Box of Delights.*



It's not hard to find celebrity fans either – mostly from the age group who would have been watching back in 1984. Actors Simon Pegg and his frequent collaborator Nick Frost both like it; so does author Neil Gaiman. Robert McFarlane, who has made a career writing about the power of land and nature

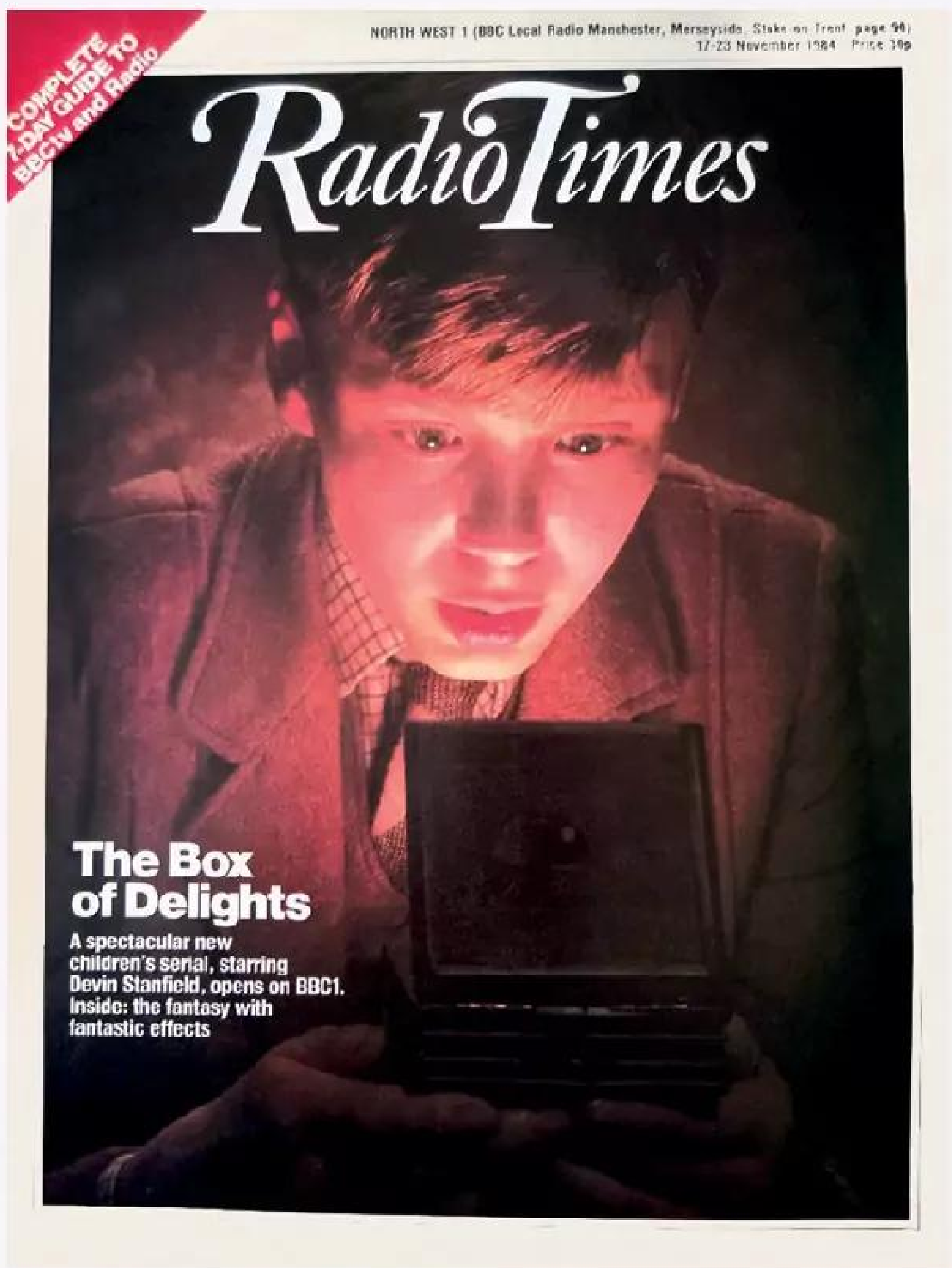


FACING PAGE: John Masefield and a 1937 first edition of *The Box of Delights*. **ABOVE:** Some of the haunting images from the programme's title sequence. **BELOW:** *The Box of Delights* got the cover spot on the *Radio Times* in 1984, a rare honour for a children's television drama at the time.

to inspire human imagination is, of course, a fan, as is folk-horror buff Mark Gatiss.

"I love the fan side of things," says Masefield expert Dr Philip Errington, editor of the former Poet Laureate's collected correspondence, and author of *Opening the Box of Delights: A Visual Celebration*.[1] "I absolutely adore the Boxers on Facebook, it's so lovely to know that you're not alone; it's a shared enthusiasm which is great, and I've learned things from them too. There was a study of Masefield published in the 1970s by an American critic and he says that he's amazed there is no cult following of the Kay Harker books in the way that there was a following for Hobbits etc, and I think now he's wrong, because there is."

Philip had read *The Box of Delights* long before the TV version came along but the vast majority of Boxers only discovered the story thanks to BBC1. Box fan Stephanie Stanley's description of falling in love with it as a 13-year-old will feel familiar to many. "It was on at such a dark time of year and that made it even more exciting. It was all dark and wintry – I loved all the magic, and the music was incredible. I used to rush home from school to watch it and my brother did the same. It was discovering something new." For younger viewers, the show's folk horror tinged imagery often burned itself into their subconscious minds. The now 44-year-old fan Phil Collingwood is not alone when he says: "For many years I thought it was a dream. I had an image of kids flying and a little Mr Punch face and a wolf – it was very scary, but it was never more than a vague echo in my brain. And then when I was 14 I was at a friend's house and I saw the VHS on the shelf and the whole thing came flooding back to me." The BBC publicity blitz helped hook the more technically minded kids in the audience. Katie Fraser, now a mascot costume maker and TV toy collector, says: "I saw a feature about it on *Blue Peter* talking about how they did the flying and that's why I watched it. I loved finding out how it was all done with the Quantel Paintbox. BBC effects were really my thing as a child, and they still are."


COMPLETE 7-DAY GUIDE TO BBCtv and Radio
NORTH WEST 1 (BBC Local Radio Manchester, Merseyside, Stoke on Trent page 96)
17-23 November 1984 Price 30p
Radio Times
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A spectacular new children's serial, starring Devin Stanfield, opens on BBC1. Inside: the fantasy with fantastic effects

MASEFIELD'S MAGIC

Part of what makes this story so appealing is the magic drawn from many sources, including classical mythology, Grimm's fairy tales, and mediæval alchemy. It's not exactly unusual for children's fiction to include magic but Masefield's take on it is original and compelling. He pits the "Old Magic" of Cole Hawlings, which seems to be drawn from nature and tradition, against the "New Magic" of Abner Brown, which is all formulæ and ritual. In the years since first dreaming of *The Box of Delights*, Phil Collingwood has developed a keen interest in folklore and he describes it as: "The old instinctive, unspoken magic versus the new, where everything is codified."

He continues: "Masefield is drawing on things like the vegetation rituals from *The Golden Bough* and some of the earliest traditions from across the world where the wild is a place where revelation happens, where change happens. And he's contrasting it with the growing mechanisation and industrialisation of the world around him. I think Masefield, like CS Lewis and like Tolkien – whom he knew – was responding to the death, as a result of war, of the world they were born into, and the new world which was developing around them."

Cole, the itinerant Punch and Judy man in his shabby clothes, fits the archetype of the traditional rural Cunning Man, while middle class Abner personifies the formal, intellectual, Western mystery tradition of Eliphas Levi and McGregor Mathers. Like Roger Bacon, he consults a Brazen Head for prophecy, like Prospero he commands a boyish elemental spirit, and like King Solomon he summons demons to do his bidding.[2] Some sources suggest that Masefield was himself a member of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, but this is unlikely as he really was too young. Later, he became friends with poet and occultist WB Yeats, who *was* a member, so it's possible they could have discussed Golden Dawn magic. However, there's nothing in the rituals of Abner Brown that Masefield couldn't have picked up from popular fiction.

The way the story deals with Christianity is curious too. Evil Abner launches a bizarre scheme to kidnap clergymen, but this isn't a CS Lewis or Charles Williams type of fantasy where Christian belief triumphs over darkness. The churchmen in *The Box of Delights* are nice but ineffectual; in fact, all the usual authority figures, from police to parents, are either absent or completely useless. It's the children who lead the fight and schoolboy hero Kay – (played in the TV version by 13-year-old Devin Stanfield) is motivated by ideals of fair play and doing the right thing rather than by any deeper spiritual zeal. Meanwhile his tomboy friend Maria resists the bad guys out of sheer contrariness. The story reaches a climax

PHOTOS: BBC

LEFT: Cole Hawlings (Patrick Troughton) and Kay Harker (Devin Stanfield) in Hereford Cathedral. **BELOW:** Robert Stephens as the evil Abner Brown. **BOTTOM:** Kay and Mouse (Simon Barry).

with Midnight Mass at fictional Tatchester Cathedral (filmed inside the real Hereford Cathedral), but the newly rescued Bishop and his staff only make it to the church on time by hitching a lift in Herne the Hunter's flying sledge.

This melding of faith with folklore seems like a fair representation of Masefield's views on religion. According to Dr Philip Errington, "Masefield and religion is quite a complex area. He was certainly not traditional Church of England, but I think if there is any sort of religious conviction, it does change throughout his life. He did write Biblical drama,[3] but I think he wrote it because the story was strong. He questions God. Towards the end, reincarnation is an idea that he becomes comfortable with."

SCROBBLEFEST

The TV version of *The Box* is an unusual mix, blending live-action video with traditional 2D animation and using a range of very different styles to represent the various non-human characters. For Boxers, this is all part of its unique charm. Phil Collingwood sees it as a response to the dreamlike ambiguity of Masefield's book where the villains might or might not really shapeshift into wolves. His fellow fan Kelly Borlase-Hendry sees parallels in children's daily experience of play, saying: "Within a toybox you'll have teddy bears and Barbies and other things and they're all different shapes and sizes, but a child playing with them will have them all interact together. It doesn't seem unnatural for a child, because that's how a child's mind operates."

The BBC adaptation sticks pretty closely to Masefield's book, with some dialogue quoted word-for word, although sub-plots have been cut or simplified to fit the three-hour run-time. The parts that seem most strange and outlandish to modern viewers – and even to viewers in 1984 – are often the bits which would have felt bang up to date for the readers of 1934. Pop culture is no longer obsessed with the kinds of gangsters and crime-lords who romped through the pages of Dick Tracy comics. Electric fairy-lights are not a novelty and print newspapers that publish several editions a day have gone the way of the dinosaurs. The slang is dated too, but it has been enthusiastically adopted by the online Boxers. Words like "splendiferous" (really good), "tin" (money), and "fantods" (apprehension or fear) are used as a way of identifying each other and fostering a shared group identity. Masefield's own invented slang-term "scrobbling", meaning kidnapping, has given the Boxers a name for their annual get-together: the Scrobblefest.

Scrobblefest began as a celebration of the show's 30th anniversary but it's more than just a convention. Each November the Boxers meet up at one of the filming locations used by the BBC, such as The Severn Valley Railway or the Dudley Canal Trust. There is conversation, there are games and quizzes, there is cosplay, there are shared meals, but most of all there's a sense of connection. In 2020 the Scrobblefest had to move online due to COVID, but since then, it has continued as both a real-world and a virtual event. Kelly Borlase Hendry, one of the organisers, explains: "We found there were quite a few members who would have loved to join Scrobblefest in person, but it would be just too much for them, and that's where the online events really came into their own, so the plan is to continue having both. For quite a few members of the group, it does expand their world, and I think that's quite important." It's clear that this is more than just a fan-club, it's a community. Stephanie Stanley sums it up when she says:

UK WOLF CONSERVATION TRUST

PHOTOS COURTESY BOX OF DELIGHTS FAN CLUB

ABOVE: Scrobblefest 2017 at the UK Wolf Conservation Trust in Berkshire, which was one of the filming locations used in the TV series. **BELOW:** Fans wearing wolf masks at the 2023 Scrobblefest at Arley Station. Behind them is the hillside where Kay Harker first sees running wolves in the first episode of the series.

"Finding the group for the first time was a revelation, I couldn't believe there was a whole group out there who loved it as much as I did, and I could talk to them about it, and they'd get it. It was incredible."

Clare Sloane is an actor whose love of *The Box of Delights* had a life-changing impact. She's the creative force behind the Sylvia Daisy Pouncer role-play accounts on social media. Sylvia Daisy is, of course, a witch, the wife of Abner Brown and ex-governess of Kay Harker. She's played with relish in the TV version by cult film and TV legend Patricia Quinn. As Clare describes it: "I'm an impressionist as well as an actor and I'd taught myself to do Pat Stephens.[4] Then, during the pandemic, I lost my dad. I was grieving heavily; I wasn't even leaving the house because of lockdown. and I thought what can I do to take myself away from being Clare? So I started posting only as Pouncer. I thought, 'I can lose myself in this magic from my childhood'. And then for the online Scrobblefest I did a reading as Pouncer. I just put a hat on and did Patricia's voice and from there it kind of grew. Now I have 10,000 followers." Apparently, the real Patricia Stephens approves.

Box fans tend to be most active around Christmas, when the nights turn dark, the snow (sometimes) starts to fall and magic begins to seem possible. Some viewers binge on the whole story in one go, while others choose to watch it episode by episode, once a week, finishing on Christmas Eve, just as it was for the original BBC broadcast. Stephanie Stanley is one of many Boxers whose children have had to learn to love the show. "They're grown up now," she says, "but every Christmas we still sit together and watch *The Box*, and nobody's allowed to be on their phones. They've watched it from very early on – there was no choice!"

The impact of the 1984 adaptation was significant. On television, it directly paved the way for the ambitious TV versions of *The Chronicles of Narnia* and other fantasy series of the later 1980s. More widely, it revived interest in an almost-forgotten classic novel. The generation who watched back in 1984 have gone on to adapt the story for the stage (most recently performed by the RSC in Stratford upon Avon) for audio (released by Big Finish starring Mark Gatiss and Sir Derek Jacobi) and even a cabaret version staged on the streets of Hereford.[5] This year, for the 40th anniversary, there'll be a few extra treats in the Boxers' Christmas stockings, including a fresh Blu-ray release packed with interviews, documentaries and other material, and a new edition of Philip Errington's book, including a reprint of the first episode script by screenwriter Alan Seymour. Astonishingly, no scripts for episodes four to six are known to survive, so if anyone finds one stuffed down the back of the sofa, that really would be splendiferous.

NOTES

1 A new and expanded edition of *Opening the Box of Delights: A Stunning visual celebration of John Masefield's Christmas classic* was published by Darton, Longman and Todd in October 2024.

2 As a child, I learned how to draw a pentagram by copying Abner. The Seventies and early Eighties were a golden age for occultism in children's TV. From *Ace of Wands* to *Doctor Who*, from *Shadows* to *Robin of Sherwood*, ritual magic was everywhere.

3 *The Coming of Christ* by John Masefield was performed in Canterbury Cathedral in 1929 with music by Gustav Holst and design by Charles Ricketts

4 Stephens is the married name of Patricia Quinn, who wed her *Box of Delights* co-star Robert Stephens in 1995.

5 Staged in December 2019 by 2Faced Dance.

LISA GLEDHILL is a writer and film-maker old enough to remember watching *The Box of Delights* in 1984 because she'd heard Doctor Who was going to be in it.

SCROBBLED!

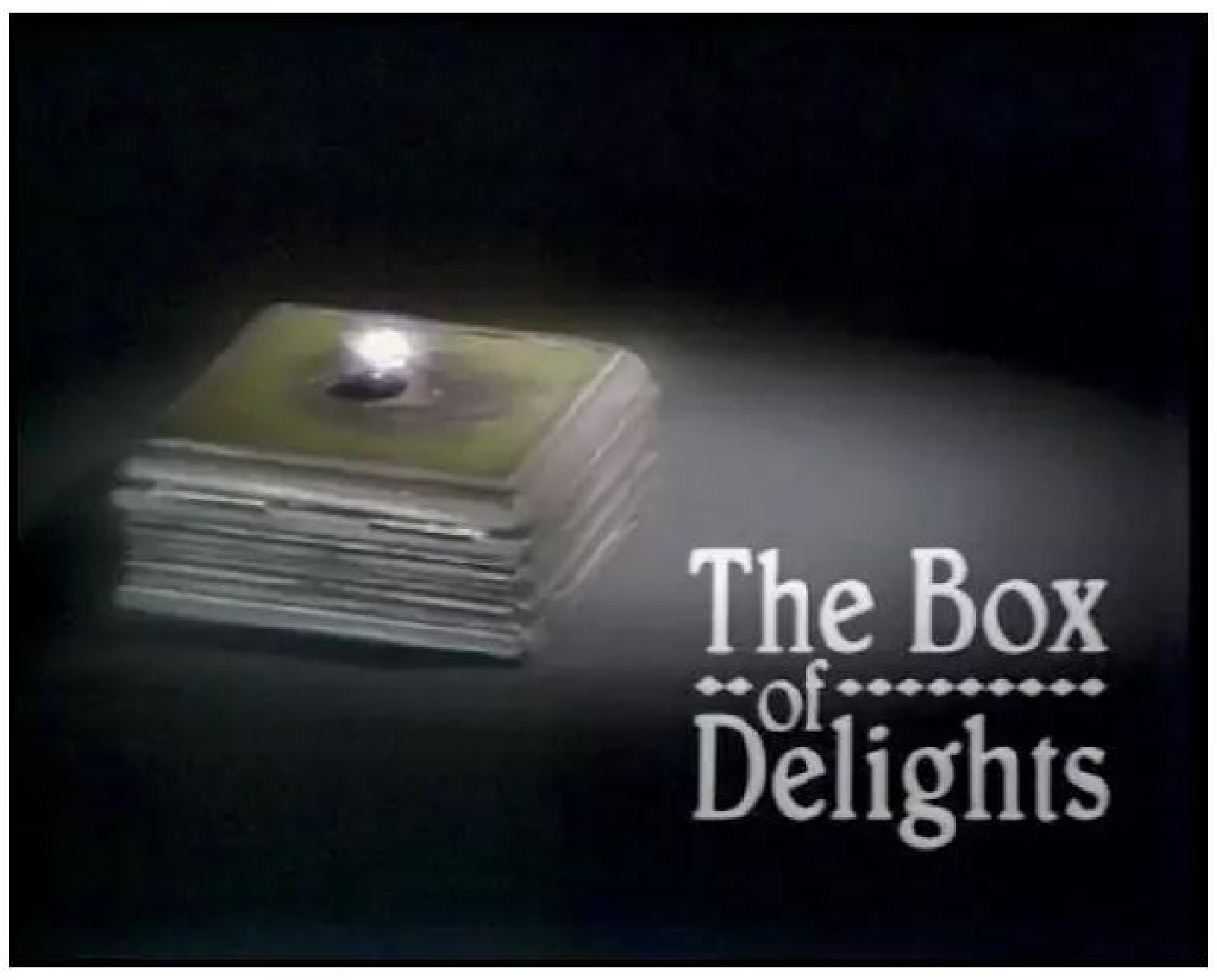
The special anniversary Blu-ray of *The Box of Delights* includes *Time and Tide*, a new feature-length documentary from film-maker CHRIS CHAPMAN. Taking his rightful place at the heart of it? The elusive DEVIN STANFIELD, four decades on from his spellbinding central performance as intrepid schoolboy Kay Harker. Without a tosser to his kick, **BOB FISCHER** scrobbles them both.

PHOTOS COURTESY STANLEY MILFORD JR

"I first watched *The Box of Delights* when I was four or five years old," says Chris Chapman. "We had it on VHS, taped from the telly. It was a programme my mum and dad adored, and they wanted to introduce me to it. My dad loved it because he was a train buff and it had so many shots of the Severn Valley railway line! And my mum loved it for the traditional British folklore and fairy tales it features.

"Whereas I just found it completely magical. I genuinely think it's the BBC's greatest-ever endeavour. In terms of every department going full steam, every cylinder, it's the most ambitious series they ever made. It had a budget of a million pounds, and a director in Renny Rye who was hungry and wanted to show that he should be making feature films. He'd been making short inserts for *Blue Peter*, but suddenly he had a million quid to make an epic fantasy drama, and he just went for it."

Forty years after *The Box of Delights* became one of the highlights of the 1984 Christmas TV schedules, the anniversary is being celebrated with a sumptuous new Blu-ray release. The set includes *Time and Tide*, Chris's staggeringly ambitious new feature-length documentary. Running to 1 hour 40 minutes, it revisits key locations from the series as well as interviewing almost the entire surviving cast and crew. And the genuine coup? Devin Stanfield is all over it. He's even back on the Severn Valley railway line with Renny Rye. In 1984, the 12-year-old Devin assumed the lead role of Kay Harker, the intrepid schoolboy whose encounter with the titular box leads to a world of dangerous magic. In the intervening decades, however, he has been decidedly reluctant to discuss his memories of the show.



"BOX OF DELIGHTS WAS THE PERFECT CONCLUSION TO A YEAR RIDDLED WITH STRANGENESS"

"I've been very media shy for the last 40 years," confirms Devin. "I've turned down almost every request for contact or interviews. I just don't have any interest in doing that kind of thing. So when Chris e-mailed me about his documentary, I was going to say no. I did an interview with Renny 20 years ago for the DVD release, and I didn't know if I had much to add to that.

"But as soon as Chris said he wanted to revisit the locations, and that Renny would be there, I was like 'What? I basically get to stay in a hotel for the weekend and go on the piss with Renny? Yeah, alright, I'll do that!' So I've had a bit of a mental block about it all, but it's been a healthy, cathartic process to go back to it after 40 years. I can look at it with fresh eyes now and be a little less reactionary. It's been great fun."

For Chris Chapman, the participation of the show's lead actor and director were deal-breakers in the production of *Time and Tide*. "I wanted Devin and Renny at the heart of the documentary," nods Chris. "Because it really is their story. For a 12-year-old like Devin to be thrown into a rollercoaster like that, a full year of production… it was basically like he'd been cast as Harry Potter. And I think genuinely, if he'd been born a bit later, he'd have been in the running for that. He's a real unsung talent, and he gives a great performance in *The Box of Delights*."

CHRISTMAS PAST

Let's go back to Christmas 1984. For children of a certain age, *The Box of Delights* felt like the perfect conclusion to a year riddled with folkloric strangeness, a year when British playgrounds were dominated by spirited re-enactments of *Robin of Sherwood* and the *Fighting Fantasy* books. Was Devin himself gleefully immersed in all this splendiferous weirdness? Was *The Box of Delights* a book he would have read at the time?

"I hadn't read it, but there was a copy in the house," he recalls. "So when I heard I was going to the audition, I managed to read about three quarters of it. I got through a good chunk of it on the way, on the train with my mum! That stood me in good stead. Renny Rye did the interview himself, and I proceeded to ask him a ton of questions that suddenly started dawning on me. 'How are you going to do *this* on a children's show?' Because there's far more fantasy in the book than in the TV version, some really crazy stuff going on. I just bombarded him with questions, and I guess it was that curiosity that attracted him. Renny says the reason he cast me is because I reminded him of himself as a boy: confident and curious. So reading the book did me a favour, really.

"And to answer your question about fantasy, I'd also read *Lord of the Rings* shortly before my audition. So although I didn't fully understand what an incredible and significant talent Robert Stephens was, I did know him as Aragorn from the BBC radio adaptation. And to me, that was the best thing on Earth! As much as I love Viggo Mortensen's performance in the films, for me Aragorn's voice will always be Robert Stephens."

In the 1950s and 1960s, Stephens had been a theatrical powerhouse, widely regarded as the heir to Laurence Olivier's mantle. By the 1980s his career had faltered, but – as central villain Abner Brown – he brings a deliciously dark frisson to *The Box of Delights*. It's a performance that crackles with flamboyant malevolence.

"With Robert Stephens, I think what you see is just ultimate commitment," agrees

BBC

ABOVE: Cole Hawlings (Patrick Troughton) and Kay Harker (Devin Stanfield) at Arley Station in the 1984 programme. **BELOW:** Devin and *Box of Delights* director Renny Rye with the real Box, back at Arley Station on the Severn Valley Railway in 2024.

Chris Chapman. "We spoke to Patricia Quinn for the documentary. She played Sylvia Daisy Pouncer, but she was also living with Robert at the time. They later married, and she became Lady Stephens. She told us that Robert had listened to *The Box of Delights* on the radio in the 1940s, with his dad, and he'd loved it. So when the BBC approached him, he said that he would pay *them* to play Abner Brown.

"And the documentary explores that commitment. When Abner falls into the sluice gates at the end of the series, it's really Robert Stephens doing it! And when he goes under the water in slow motion, that's genuine canal water pouring into his mouth." It's a memory that makes Devin Stanfield chuckle with relish.

"The fact that he swam a victory lap is my favourite part of that story!" he laughs. "The stuntman jumped into the canal once, but Renny didn't get the shot he wanted so he asked for a second take. The stuntman kicked off and said he wasn't going in there again – it was too cold and too dangerous to do it twice. So Robert Stephens, who was a very strong swimmer and had almost certainly been at the vodka by that point, said 'Fuck that, I'll do it'. And he did! And then, just to rub salt into the wounds of the embarrassed stuntman, he proceeded to swim a couple of lengths of the canal just to prove how easy it was."

The light to Stephens's shade, meanwhile, is provided by Patrick Troughton. Playing enigmatic Punch and Judy man Cole Hawlings, the erstwhile Second Doctor becomes the custodian of the Box of Delights and a seasoned practitioner of "old magic".

"I think one of the things people have always admired about *The Box of Delights* is the presence of those veteran performers," says Chris. "There's a great bit in the documentary when Devin is talking about being opposite Patrick on the railway platform in

ARLEY
BOOKING OFFICE

CHRIS CHAPMAN

PHOTOS: BBC

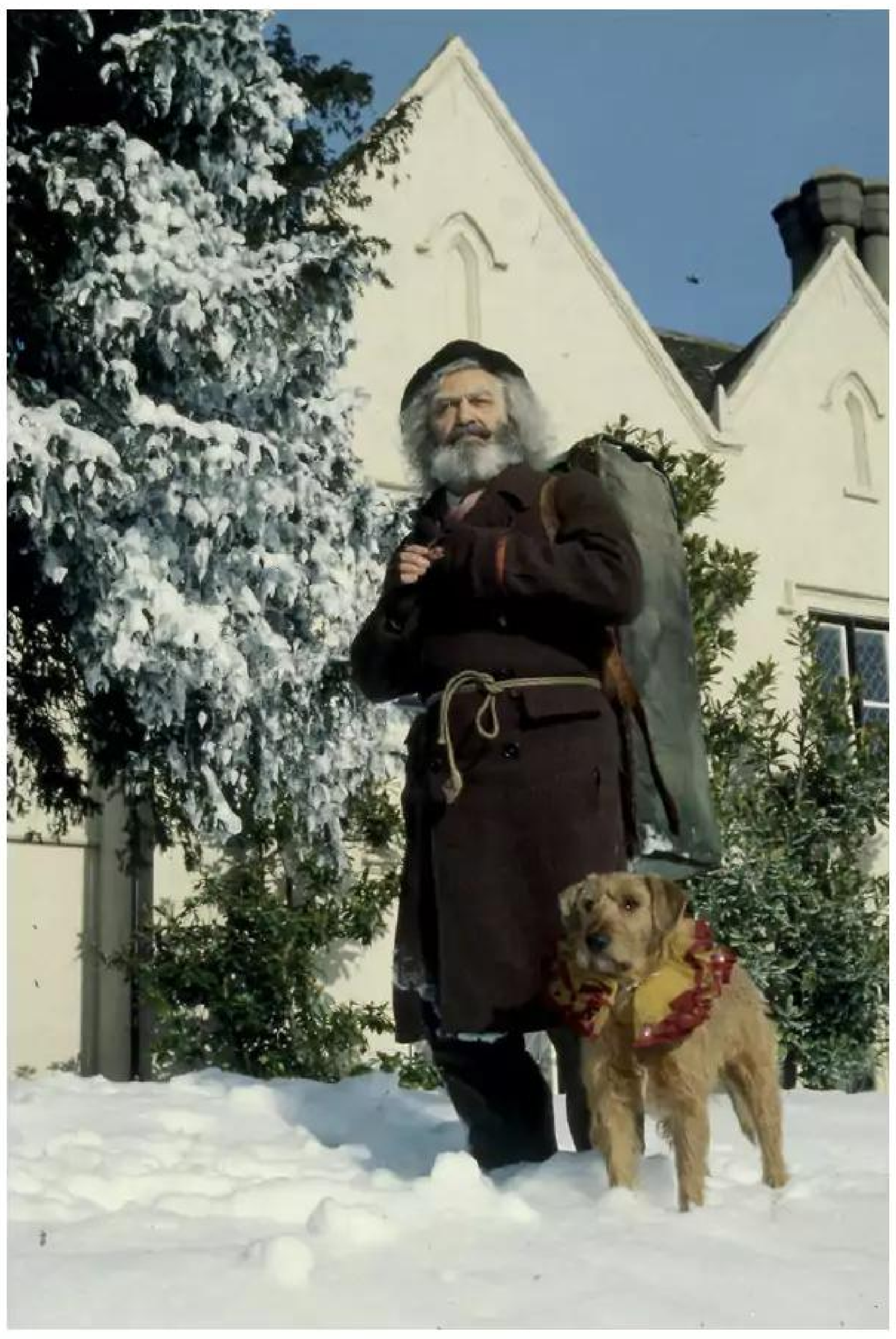
ABOVE: Devin Stansfield as Kay at Arthur's Camp. **BELOW:** Cole Hawlings (Patrick Troughton) and his dog in some very real snow.

Episode One, and he says the hairs on his arms were standing on end. He said he could smell Patrick's breath – and not in a bad way! It was just a really intimate and scary moment."

"I'd worked on television before," remembers Devin. "I'd done two shows – John Wyndham's *Chocky* and Nina Bawden's *The Robbers* – so I'd been on set with some very good actors. But I'd never been in a lead role, and I'd never done anything particularly intense. Most of my scenes had been opposite other kids. So that moment on the platform, where I'm face-to-face with Patrick Troughton, really close up, and he switched it on… yeah. I didn't really have to act. "I was surrounded by very giving, very skilled and very experienced actors. They fed me what I needed and I was naive and innocent enough to respond naturally. So yes, Patrick was a very memorable person to act opposite. I would describe his performance as mesmeric. There was almost a heat coming off him. He embodied the role."

STEAM AND SNOW

For a generation of kids, *The Box of Delights* has become synonymous with the unique feel of Christmas in the 1980s, a period when resolutely analogue delights began to be superseded by the alluring charms of the digital world. The children of 1984 were just as likely to covet a ZX Spectrum as a Hornby train set, and the series captures that moment perfectly, swathing ancient folkloric weirdness with a raft of swanky digital effects. For Chris Chapman, this balance between old and new magic is struck perfectly, with Renny Rye's insistence on ambitious location work being an integral part of the mix.



> "THEY HOPED FOR SIX INCHES OF SNOW, TO MAKE EVERYTHING LOOK PRETTY, BUT THEY GOT SIX FEET"

"We think about the budget being spent on electronic effects and animation," says Chris. "But one of the series' great virtues is how much Renny filmed on location. When they filmed on a steam train, it was a *real* steam train. And when he said 'We want lots of snow,' then – for the most part – they didn't fake it. He said 'Where are we most likely to get snow in February?' And the answer was just outside Aberdeen. When they got there, there was far more snow than they bargained for, but for the viewers it's just beautiful. That snow is so deep. It was hell for the crew, and we dwell quite a lot on just how cold it was, but they all knew it was worth it. Even now, whenever I wonder whether it will snow at Christmas, those scenes from *The Box of Delights* are my ideal vision of how it should look."

It might have been hell for the crew, but surely this kind of stuff was terrific fun for the kids on set? Devin Stanfield laughs heartily at the suggestion.

"They were hoping for six inches of snow, a nice dusting to make everything look pretty, but they got six feet!" he recalls. "The location vans couldn't get up there, the equipment got stuck and they couldn't reach half the locations they'd scouted. So we shot most of those scenes in the grounds of our hotel. The only other location I remember visiting was for the 'scrobbling' scene, literally waist-deep in snow in a ditch. I just remember being bitterly, bitterly cold. And then going back to some crappy location bus with diesel heaters, trying to get my hands warm enough to hold a pen and do some schoolwork!"

As well as assembling 25 assorted cast

and crew members (“I got carried away!” he grins), Chris’s documentary also uncovers some key props from the original filming. “The most remarkable thing happened when I contacted the show’s puppeteer,” says Chris. “He’s a chap called Jonathan Styles, and he was the real Punch and Judy man in *The Box of Delights*. I contacted him hoping we’d get a nice interview, but what I didn’t expect was that he’d still have the full Punch and Judy set from the show! He brought out the actual Mr Punch puppet from the title sequence. Mr Punch, the Devil and the Policeman have all survived, and he was able to operate them all for us, and still do the voices. There are a couple of other artefacts that might pop up throughout the course of the film, too. Things that I didn’t expect to survive…”

Come on Chris, let’s do a single spoiler here. Read this and weep, misty-eyed children of 1984: forty years on, Kay Harker is still the steward of the original Box of Delights.

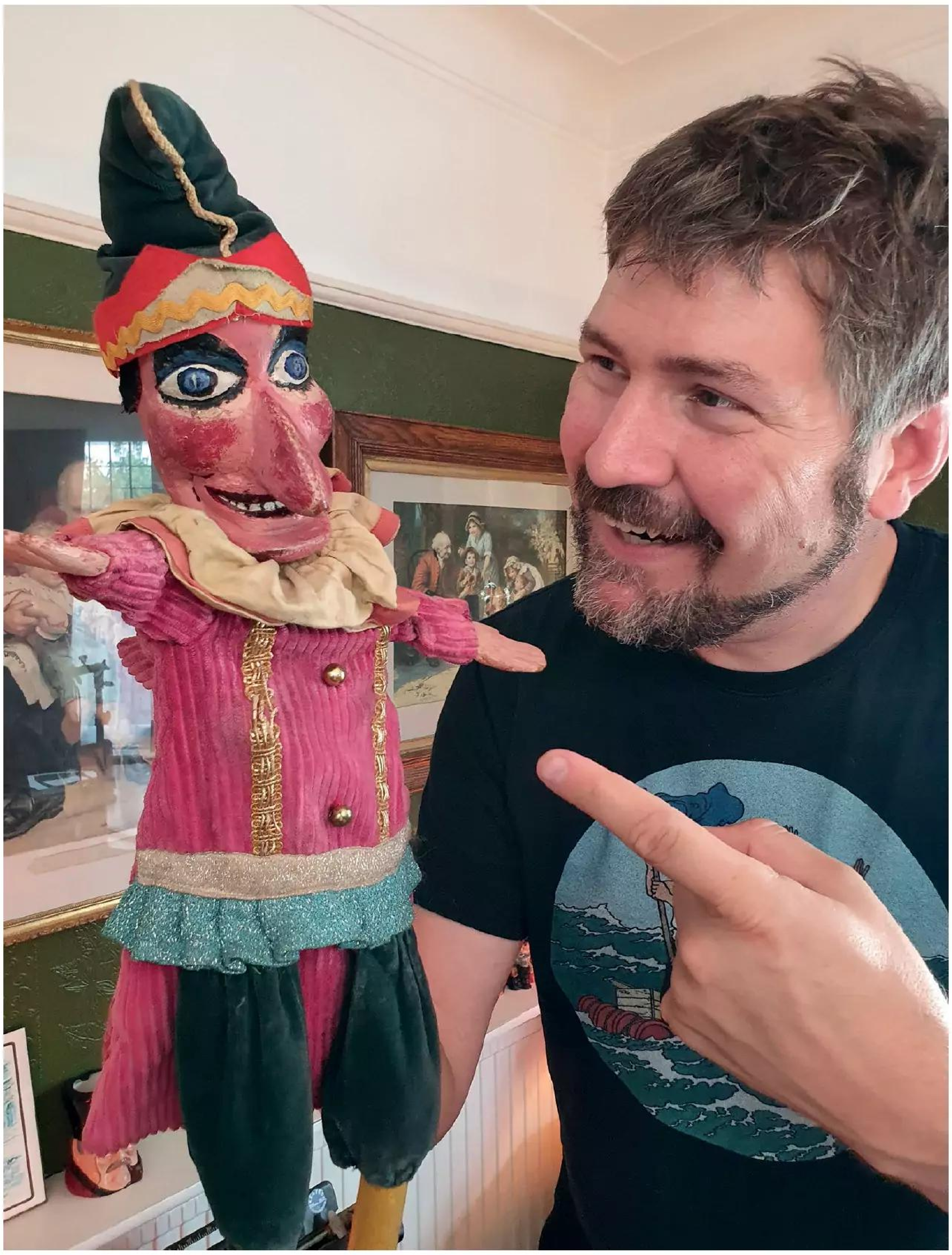
“I have *one* of them!” confirms Devin Stanfield. “Chris apparently asked around the BBC, and everyone was of the opinion that it had simply gone missing. But there’s no mystery – at the wrap party, they just gave me the box that I’d been carrying around for most of the shoot. It’s been sat on my mother’s shelf gathering dust for the last 40 years, only occasionally being taken down to show the kids. At the last minute, Chris said ‘Can you bring it?’ And I said ‘I’ll have to drive down to my mother’s and get it…’.”

SHEER AMBITION

Both men speak further about their fondness for the show and the gargantuan effort that went into its production. Chris splendidly describes the series’ spectacular final episode – broadcast on Christmas Eve 1984 – as “the *Apocalypse Now* of children’s television”. Devin is keen to stress the vital contribution of the BBC Radiophonic Workshop’s Roger Limb, who composed the show’s atmospheric score. “He’s the unsung hero,” he says. “Whenever the special effects fail, Roger Limb picks up the running.”

But for Devin, the fame afforded to him by *The Box of Delights* was a double-edged sword. Tellingly, the show marks his final performance as an actor.

“I was bullied mercilessly for the rest of my school career,” he says. “I grew up in Eastbourne, so it was small town syndrome. I was very recognisable. People come up and say ‘My child wants to be an actor, what advice would you give them?’ And I generally say ‘Don’t’. I don’t know that it’s necessarily a very healthy thing – it gives you unrealistic expectations of what life will be. And I think in my case, it radically altered how I turned out to be. I think I made the best of it: I’ve ended up working in film and TV production, and I think that was because it dawned on me that the people making all the decisions were the senior producers, the floor managers and the directors. The actors were all sat in caravans, being hauled out for five minutes then sitting on their arses for three hours.



CHRIS CHAPMAN

ABOVE: Chris Chapman with the actual *Box of Delights* Mr Punch, owned by puppeteer John Styles.

“But I don’t have any issues with having done it. I’m proud of it. It was wildly ambitious and groundbreaking for any piece of TV, but for a children’s show it was outrageous. God, the sheer ambition of it all. But for me, it’s something that I did in my childhood. It’s not part of my life now and I’m not that person – I just want to get on with my life. As a kid, I had to draw quite a firm line under it and say ‘I’m not going to be an actor, I’m going to move on, finish my education and find my own path’.”

For devoted fans, however, the show’s appeal is timeless. It’s not just an evocative and ambitious adaptation of John Masefield’s original novel, it’s a direct route to childhood Christmases, to the impossible excitement of unopened presents and the clink of glasses raised by fondly-remembered loved ones.

“I still love it,” nods Chris Chapman. “My mum and dad aren’t with us any more, but it’s my way of communing with them. When I watch it now, I feel a connection to them through *The Box of Delights*. It’s a very profound love”.

And let’s give heartfelt thanks to Devin Stanfield too – for both his original performance as Kay Harker, and for stepping back into the public arena for what he insists will be the final time.

“A pleasure!” he smiles. “Although this will be the last interview, I think. I’m going back into hiding now. I’ve had my little bit of the limelight, and that’s enough for one lifetime.”

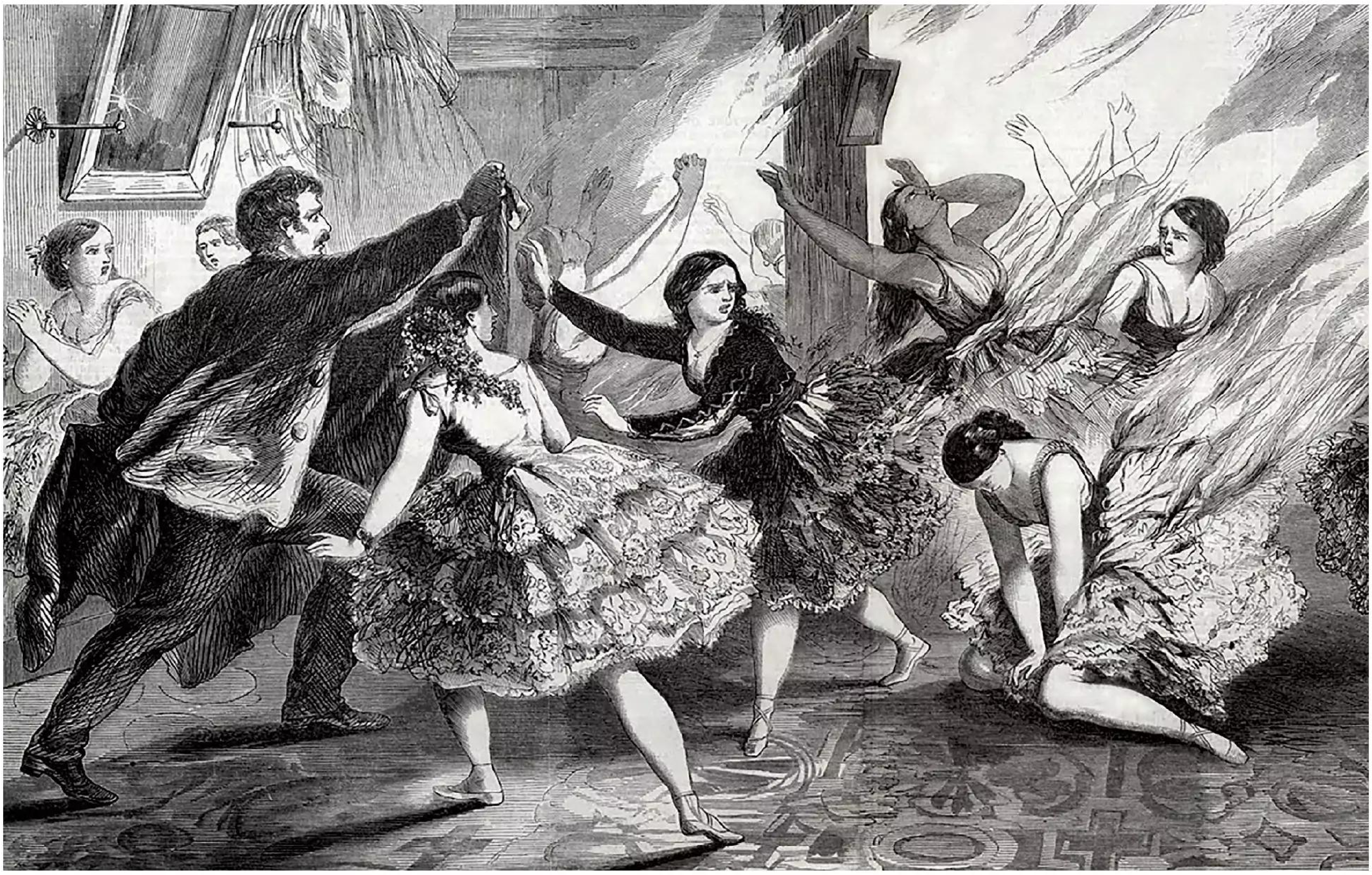
BBC
THE BOX OF DELIGHTS

***The Box of Delights* is available now as a BBC Blu-ray.**

BOB FISCHER is FT’s regular ‘Haunted Generation’ correspondent. You can find him scribbling at hauntedgeneration.co.uk or writing audio plays for mulgraveaudio.co.uk. In 2013 he tried to make a posset, but it didn’t taste anywhere near as nice as it sounds in *The Box of Delights*.

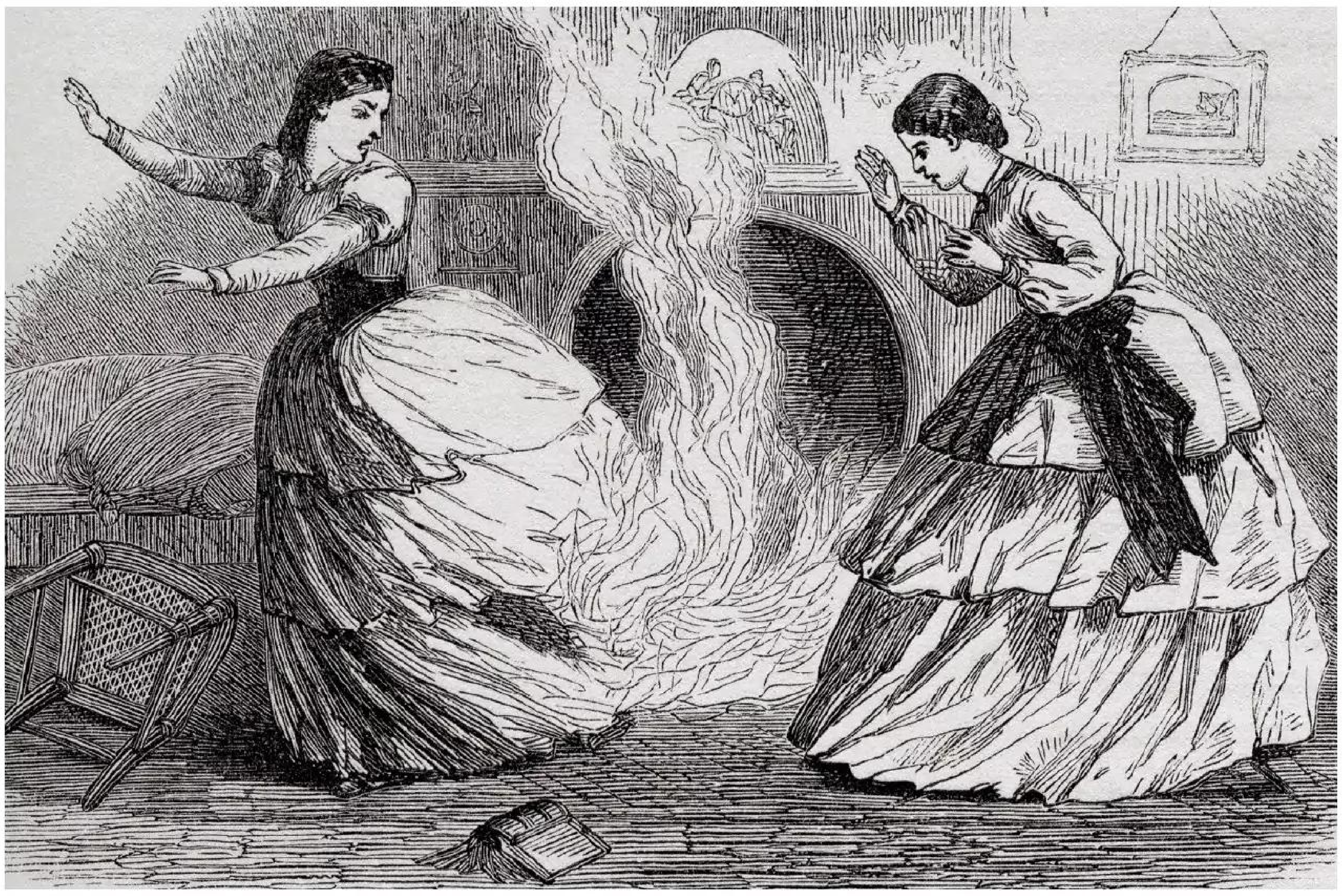
The Crinoline Inferno

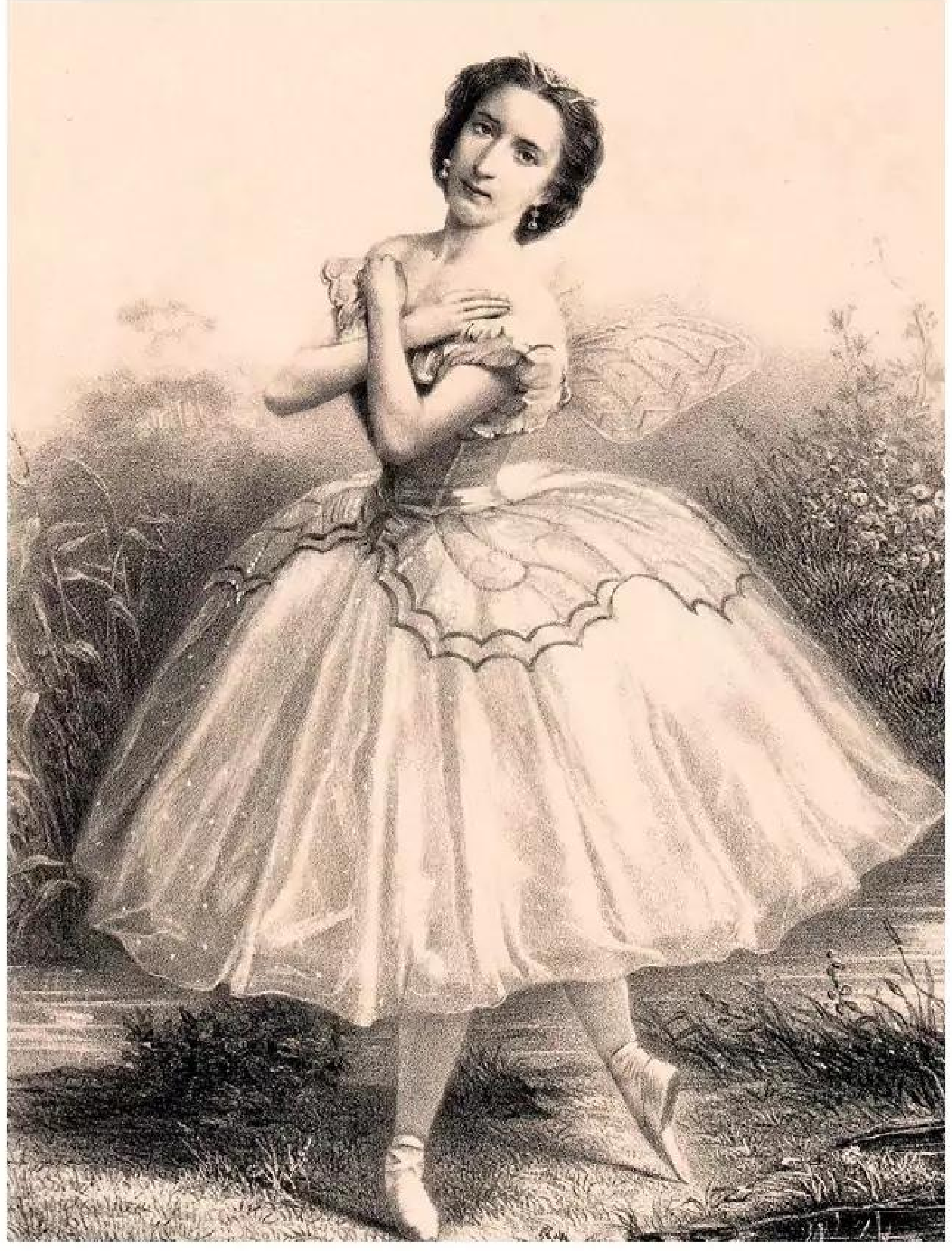
The most voguish dresses of the mid-19th century were not only absurdly voluminous but also highly flammable – and ultimately responsible for the fiery deaths of thousands of women. IAN SIMMONS tells the tragic stories of these literal fashion victims.



An entire corps de ballet died together after one dancer's costume ignited

If asked to name history's deadliest item of clothing, you might go for the corset; it constricted organs, restricted breathing, and launched a craze for insanely small wasp waists achieved by tight lacing and the removal of ribs. Or perhaps, if you are of a certain age, you might nominate bondage trousers, which could be truly lethal to try and walk downstairs in. Either way, you'd be wrong: the honour belongs to that stately 19th century favourite, the crinoline. Crinolines may look fusty, overly modest and more than a little twee, but that has more to do with 50 years of television costume dramas than reality. In truth, a number of factors combined in crinolines to make them a ridiculously dangerous death trap for anyone wearing them. During the peak of their popularity they killed at least 3,000 people in the UK alone according to an 1860 article in *The Lancet,* and in 1864 a Bulgarian doctor reported that over the previous 14 years he believed that at least 39,927 women had died in crinoline fires.





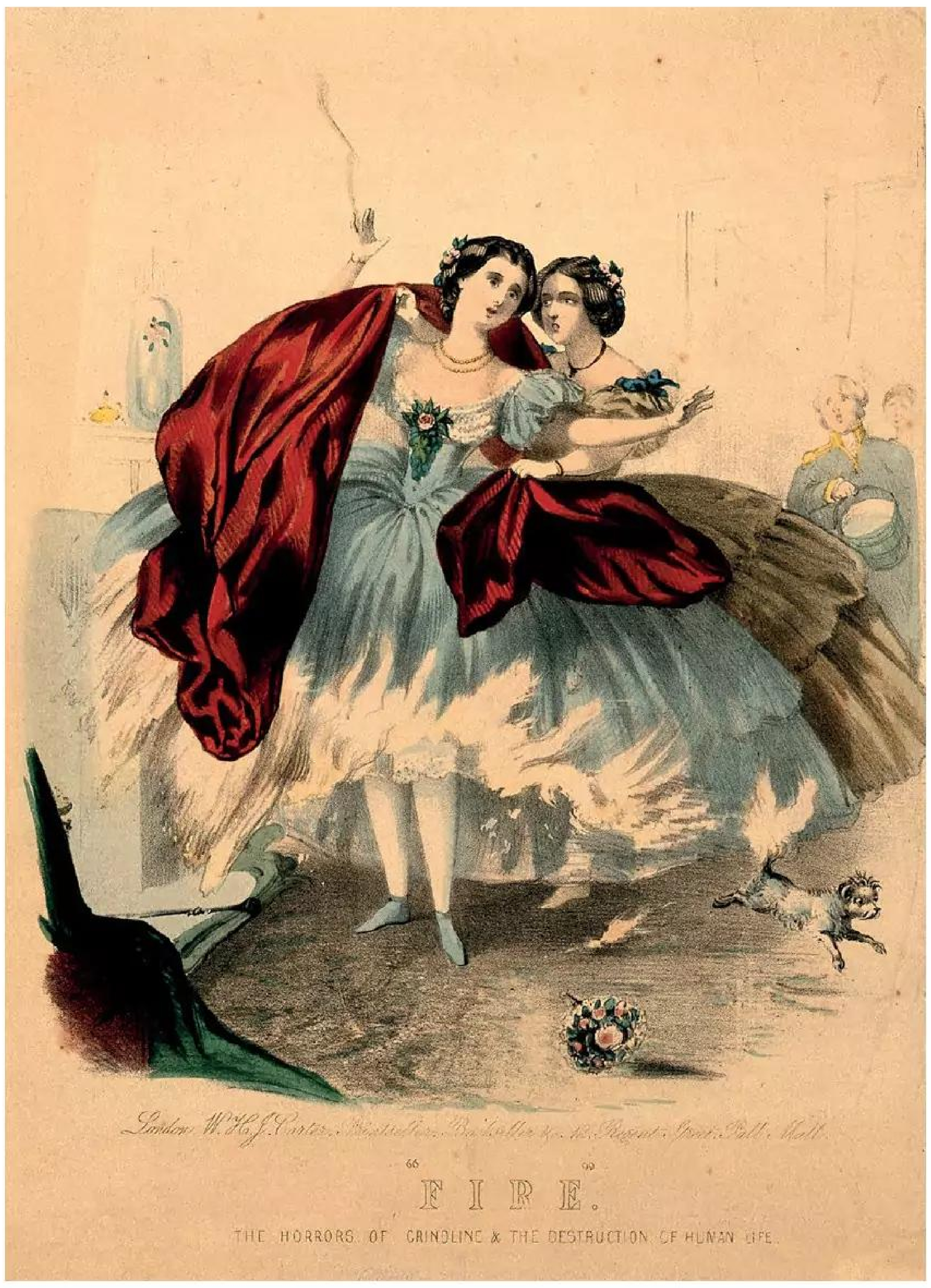
CLASSIC IMAGE / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

FACING PAGE: The Gale Sisters on fire at the Continental Theatre, 1861. **ABOVE LEFT:** Crinolines were highly flammable, as shown in this 1862 advertisement for "The Ladies Life Preserver from Fire", a new method of making dresses fire-retardent. **ABOVE RIGHT:** The unfortunate ballerina Emma Livry, who became a human torch when her tutu caught fire during a rehearsal in 1862. **BELOW:** "Fire! The horrors of crinoline and the destruction of human life" in a depiction from 1860.

BLAZING BALLERINAS

Crinolines were a development of the fashion for farthingales, popular since the 16th century: vast skirts padded out by layer upon layer of petticoats underneath to produce a sort of pannier effect at each side. By the 19th century these had evolved into a more circular shape, but the layers resulted in skirts that were heavy, unwieldy to walk in and very hot to wear. The crinoline got around this by replacing the layered petticoats initially with a stiffened underskirt of horsehair, cotton or linen, and later a sprung steel frame that held the fabric out in a bell shape, leaving the wearer's legs unencumbered inside, making it cooler and lighter to wear, and allowing the diameter of the skirt to balloon to as much as eight feet (2.4m) in some of the more extravagant ballgowns. This structure had two major drawbacks, though. Firstly, while it may have made skirts easier to move in by making them lighter, it did not make them any less unwieldy or easier to control, so it was easy for the skirt to brush against things or get caught on them. Secondly, it meant the skirts contained a vast acreage of fabric, which for crinolines was usually light, open-weave material such as cotton muslin, gauze, bobbinet or tarlatan, the kind of thing ballerinas' tutus and bridal veils are made of, but, unlike modern versions, not treated with fire-retardant.

The effect of this was bad enough in tutus; the proximity of naked flames used to light the stage for performances could result in horrific incidents. In 1862, Parisian ballet legend Emma Livry shook out her skirts as she walked on stage during dress rehearsals for the opera *La Muette du Porticii*, brushing them against a gaslight, and instantaneously erupted into a screaming column of flame careering round the stage before the theatre fireman extinguished the blaze. She survived, and hung on for a further eight months before succumbing to blood poisoning. The Musée de l'Opera in Paris still has fragments of the fatal costume on display. In another incident in 1861 an entire corps de ballet – seven dancers in total, including the four English Gale sisters – died together when they tried to help each other after one dancer's costume ignited at the Continental Theatre in Philadelphia.


"FIRE."
THE HORRORS OF CRINOLINE & THE DESTRUCTION OF HUMAN LIFE.

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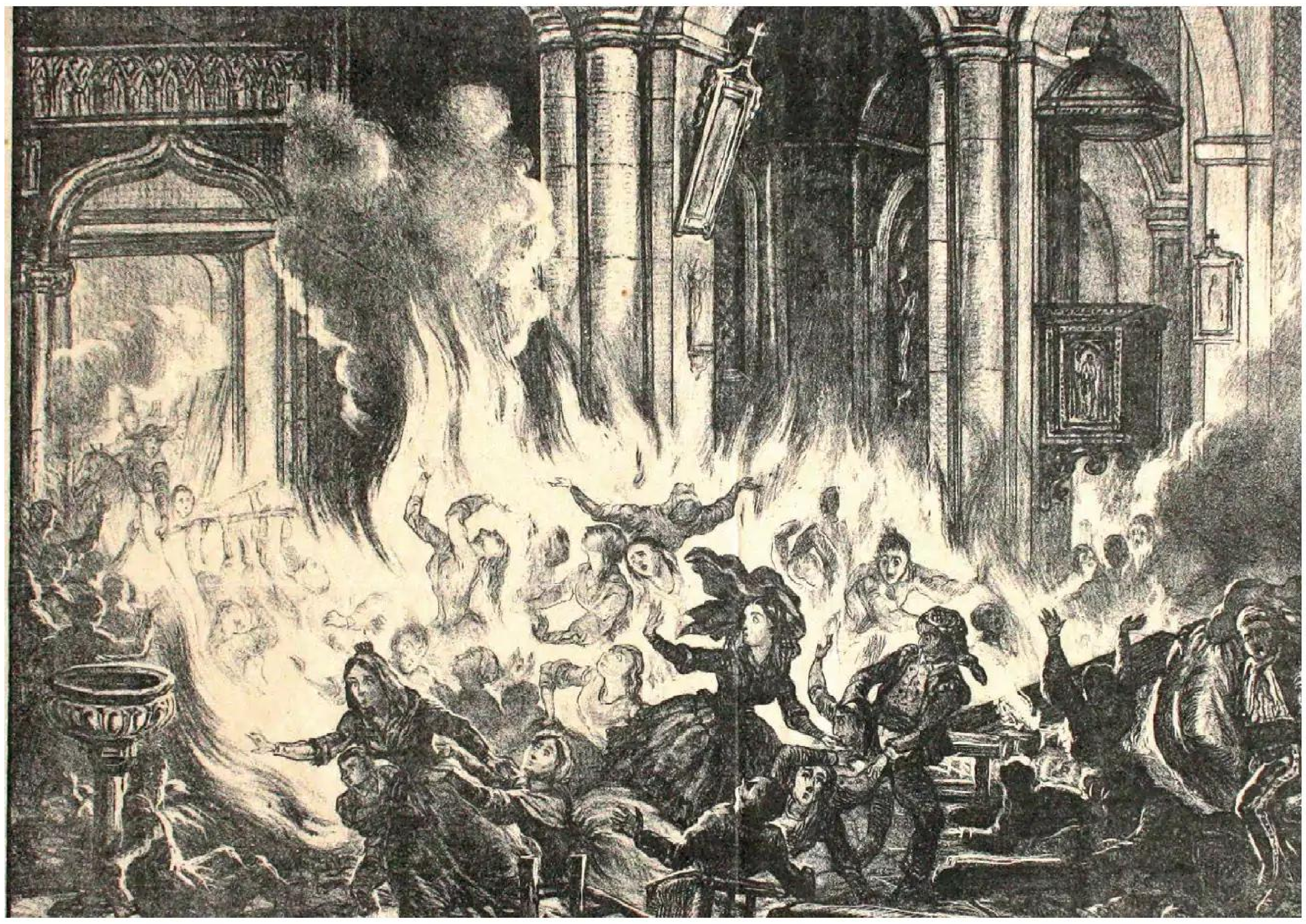
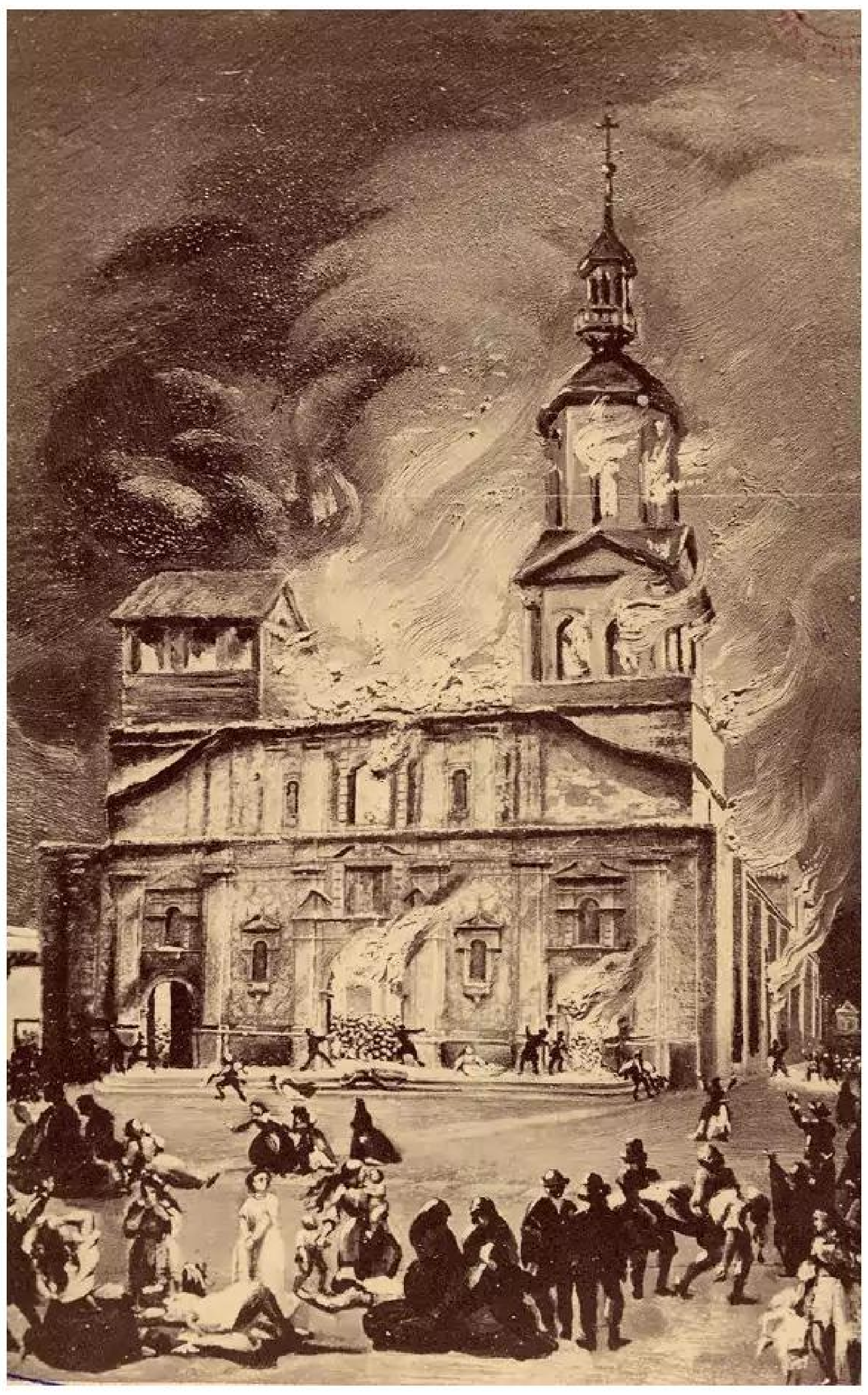
SKIRTING DISASTER

With crinolines, however, things were even worse; the empty space beneath them meant there was plenty of air circulating around them and their bell shape meant the structure of the dress acted like a chimney, channelling oxygen to create a raging blaze that could engulf the wearer in a white-hot pillar of flame in seconds if they so much as brushed against an ignition source; it also kept the fire burning intensely for much longer. In an environment where open fires and gas lights were everywhere, and health and safety legislation still a century in the future, the results could be appalling, as can be seen in this graphic description of the death of Mary Power

> *[Captain Power]… saw his sister in flames behind the curtain. He seized her in his arms and endeavoured to extinguish the fire… His sister subsequently told him that she had observed one of the candles in the inner drawing room was slanting in the candlestick, and went in to put it upright. In so doing, as her back was towards the stove, her dress caught on fire.*
>
> *She knelt down on the carpet and tried to extinguish the flame, but her efforts were useless. She then rang the bell and ran into the front drawing room, and enveloped herself in the curtains.*
>
> *When he entered the curtains were blazing from top to bottom. The dress which his sister wore was of net material over a black silk petticoat. The deputy coroner said he was surprised that the lower part of the body was not burnt. Captain Power said the crinoline kept the fire off. The deputy coroner remarked that in this case crinoline was the bane and the anti-*





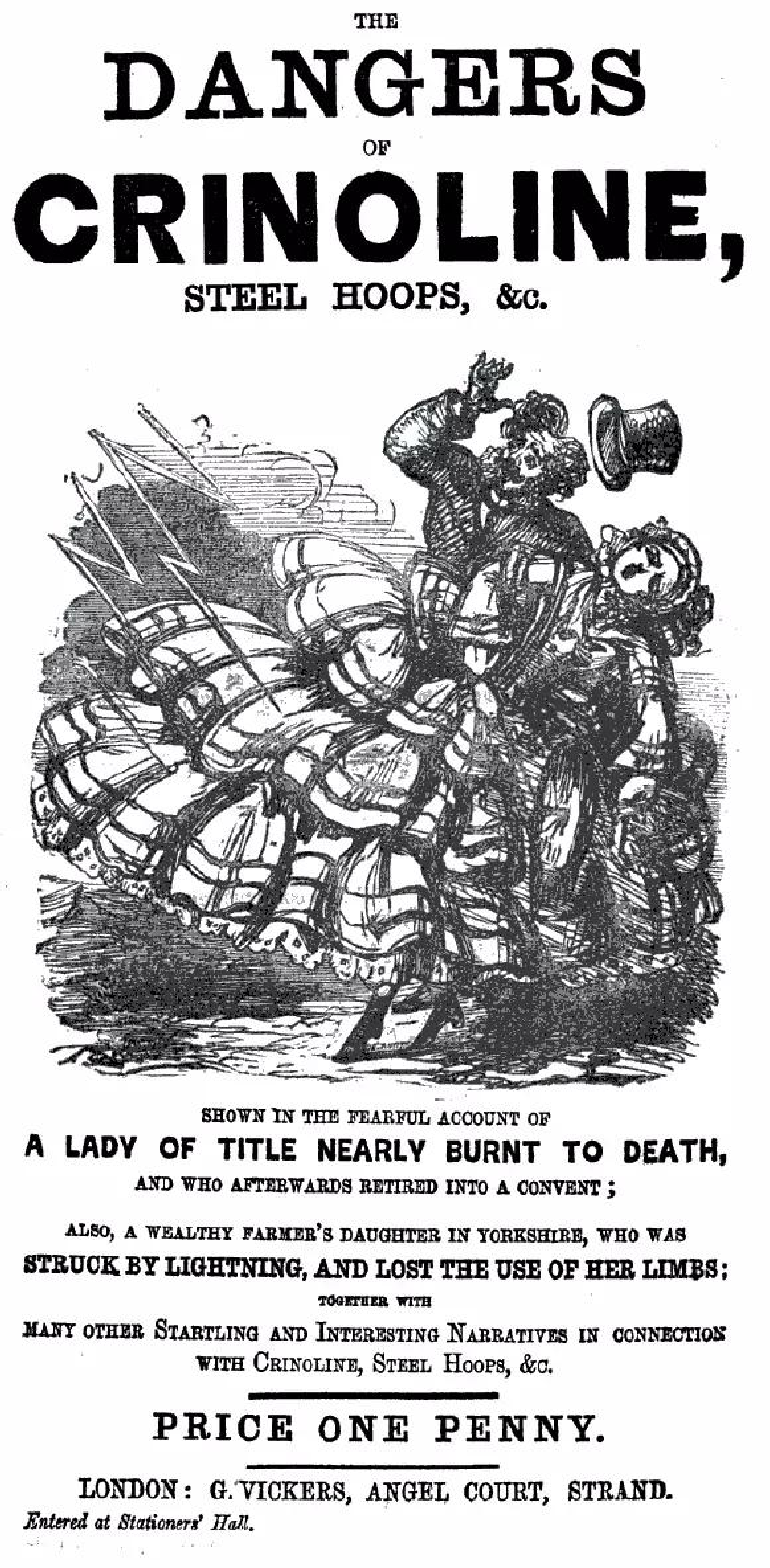
ABOVE: Two contemporary illustrations showing the horrific 1863 Church of the Company Fire in Santiago, Chile, in which between 2,000 and 3,000 people died.
BELOW: "The Dangers of Crinoline, Steel Hoops, Etc", a pamphlet published by G Vickers, 1858.

dote as it had been the means of producing the injuries to the upper body but had protected the lower part. The flames must have been very severe, because the curtains, which were of silk damask, lined with worsted, were nearly consumed.

Dr Alfred Keyner testified that he attended the deceased on the evening of Thursday week and found the unfortunate lady most extensively injured. She had been removed from the room in which the accident had occurred. Her head, face, shoulders, back, arms and hands were most dreadfully burnt, and she was insensible. He powdered her with flour, applied cotton wool and administered medicines. She died at half-past five on the following afternoon, having survived the frightful injuries she had received about 20 hours.

Prominent victims of the crinoline included the teenage Archduchess Mathilde of Austria, who died when she was surprised smoking by her father and hid the cigarette behind her back, touching her dress as she did so and going up in flames instantly. The poet Longfellow's wife died in a crinoline fire when she ignited her dress by accident while playing with their children. Longfellow struggled to extinguish her, being so badly burned in the process such that he wore heavy facial hair for the rest of his life to disguise the scarring. Oscar Wilde's illegitimate half-sisters, Mary and Emily, died of a crinoline fire that took place while they were dancing at a Hallowe'en party in Ireland. Taking one last dance with the host Andrew Reid at the end of the evening, Mary brushed against a candle, igniting her dress; when Emily went to help, she too was set alight. They were rushed outside and rolled on the ground to extinguish the flames, but despite surviving the initial ordeal both died a lingering death several days later. Little, though, was known of the girls' horrifying fate until recently, as their father was a prominent Dublin doctor and feared the grotesque manner of their death might draw attention to their patrimony and damage his standing in society – so he conspired to cover it up. As a result, the tale remained part of the secret folklore of Dublin for many years, growing in the telling to include a mysterious black-draped woman who regularly visited the girls' grave and, later, their father on his deathbed. It is not clear whether Oscar knew of his sisters' fate, or indeed their existence.

The tale remained part of the secret folklore of Dublin for many years



THE
DANGERS
OF
CRINOLINE,
STEEL HOOPS, &c.

SHOWN IN THE FEARFUL ACCOUNT OF
A LADY OF TITLE NEARLY BURNT TO DEATH,
AND WHO AFTERWARDS RETIRED INTO A CONVENT;
ALSO, A WEALTHY FARMER'S DAUGHTER IN YORKSHIRE, WHO WAS
STRUCK BY LIGHTNING, AND LOST THE USE OF HER LIMBS;
TOGETHER WITH
MANY OTHER STARTLING AND INTERESTING NARRATIVES IN CONNECTION
WITH CRINOLINE, STEEL HOOPS, &c.

PRICE ONE PENNY.

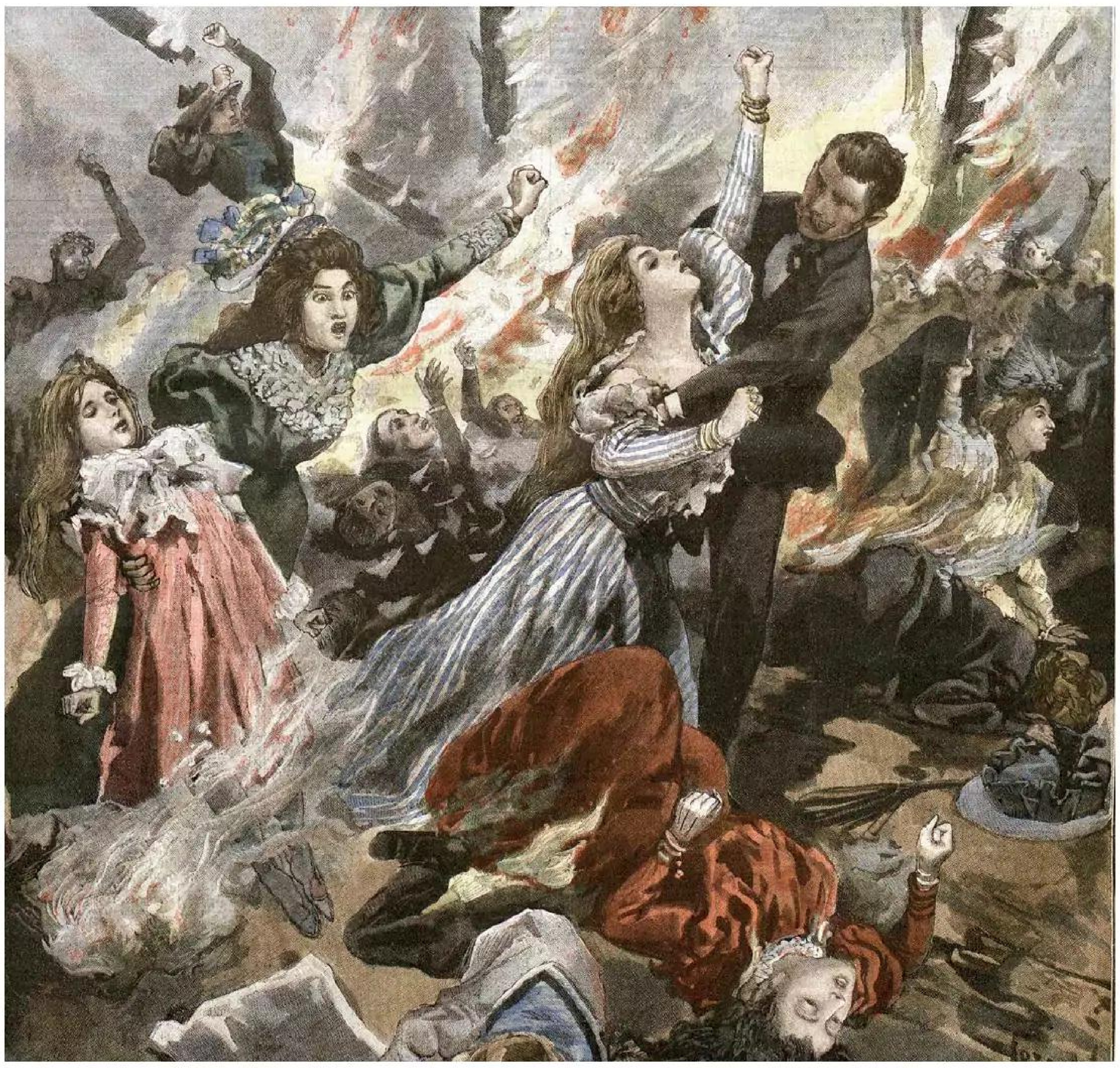
LONDON: G. VICKERS, ANGEL COURT, STRAND.
Entered at Stationers' Hall.

Papers regularly reported cases like the following, from 1861, regarding the death of 18-year-old Jane Turner:

Mr Horace Charles Downer, a gentleman residing at Sussex-place, Kensington New Town, said the deceased was a cook in his establishment. About six o'clock on the evening of Good Friday, the deceased "dished up the dinner". Soon afterwards he and Mr Downer were alarmed by piercing screams from the back garden. On looking from the window they saw the deceased running along completely enveloped in flames.

[The] witness rushed in the hall and, seizing two mats, followed the poor girl, who had run along the path back towards the house. With great difficulty he succeeded in extinguishing the flames but not before the whole of her apparel was consumed, and nearly the whole of her person frightfully burnt.

The mother of the deceased said before death, the unfortunate child had told her that she was stooping with her back to the fire when the lower part of her dress caught. At the time of the accident, she had on a crinoline with double steel hoops. The jury expressed astonishment that a young woman following the avocation of a cook, of all callings, should wear a crinoline.



LEFT: The 1897 *Bazar de la Charité* in Paris was the scene of another notorious blaze in which 126 people died, mostly aristocratic ladies wearing highly flammable crinolines and corsets. **BELOW:** Archduchess Mathilde of Austria was a prominent victim of a crinoline fire; she died after igniting her dress with a cigarette hidden behind her back.

A similar occurrence involving a Mrs Broadhurst, who ignited her dress by brushing against a candle while reaching for an envelope to post a letter, led the attending physician, Dr Gull (possibly William Withy Gull, later a Jack the Ripper suspect) to comment at the inquest that he "thought the jury ought to be advised that laundresses could, at the expense of one-eighth of a penny, put in their starch a chemical solution which would prevent their articles of dress from being so inflammable. In these days of art and science, he considered it shameful that something of this sort was not done to prevent these sad occurrences".

Despite the obvious advantages of using such a solution, it was apparently not popular as it rendered garments stiff, yellowed and strange smelling. Mrs Broadhurst's death also demonstrates one of the reasons crinoline fires were so lethal: while the blazes could begin with the slightest spark, they were often extremely difficult to put out:

> *...he lost no time in seizing upon two hearth-rugs, with which he covered her, and rang violently for assistance. The nurse, housemaid, and butler immediately attended. Every means was tried to extinguish the fire about and under the hoops with sofa cushions and other things at hand. He also knelt on and tried to compress and break the hoops for the purpose of putting the fire out. By their united efforts the burning dress and other garments outside the unfortunate lady's crinoline were extinguished. It was found, however, shortly afterwards, that the flames had insinuated themselves underneath the steel-hooped crinoline, and that she had been still smouldering without their knowledge. The hoops had to be cut off before the fire could be extinguished.*

While these incidents are horrific enough, none can surpass the horror of the Church of the Company Fire, which occurred in Santiago, Chile, in 1863. This blaze is believed to have killed between 2,000 and 3,000 people, mostly women and children, and while a number of factors contributed to the dreadful death toll, crinolines played an important part. The fire took place on the Feast of the Immaculate Conception, which not only saw the Church of the Company of Jesus packed with worshippers, but also illuminated by a profusion of naked candles and oil lamps and draped with wall hangings. When a gust of wind blew the main doors inward it toppled a candle; this ignited one of the hangings and the blaze then swiftly leapt to the others, causing panic among the congregation of several thousand, most of whom tried to flee through a single exit. Most of the women were wearing wide crinolines, with the result that more candles were overturned, igniting the crinoline wearers with predictable results. In addition, as everyone tried to escape in these unwieldy, and in many cases flaming, clothes, the single exit quickly became impassably jammed, trapping the rest of the congregation inside and preventing rescuers from gaining access; only 50 were saved before the wooden bell tower crashed into the building and made any further rescue attempts pointless. It took 10 days to retrieve all the bodies from the ruins; as most were burned beyond recognition, they were buried in a mass grave. This remains the largest number of people to die in an accidental fire in any one building anywhere in the world.

OTHER PERILS

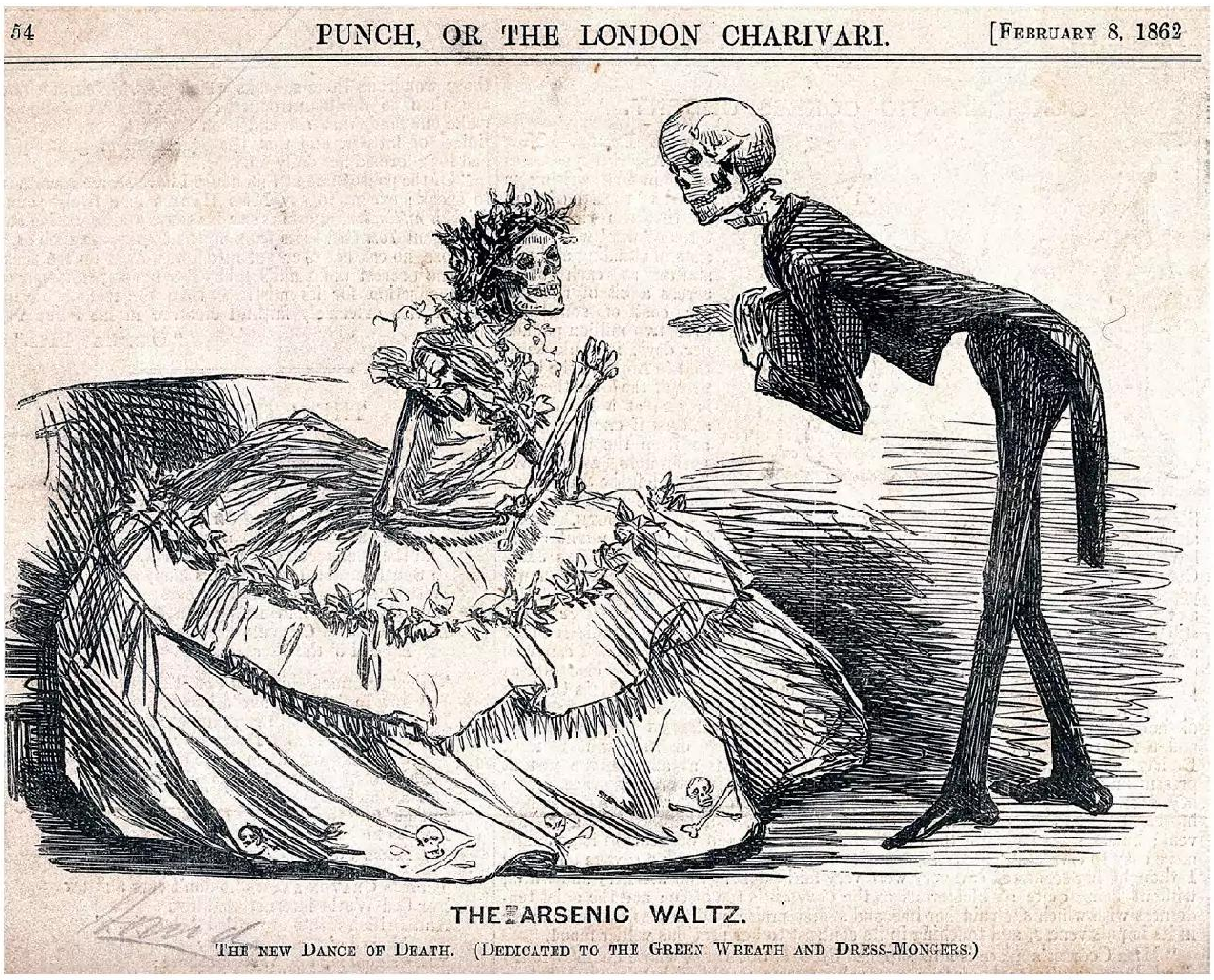
In fact, crinolines did not even need to be on fire to pose a terrible danger to the wearer; their size alone could be a liability, as the case of Mrs Leybourre, of Ballart Hills, Sunderland, demonstrates. Having dressed to go to the fair, she was helping her husband hook a sack of flour on to a moveable chain when her crinoline became entangled and drew her into the machinery. Both her legs were broken at the thigh before she could be rescued, and she also sustained severe injuries to other parts of her body. In June 1862, Ann Rollinson died after her crinoline was caught in a revolving machinery shaft in the all-too appropriately named mangling room at the Firwood bleach works, Cork, drawing her into the mechanism and crushing her. The structure of the crinoline could also be a hazard. One London paper records the case of a young servant girl named Elizabeth Cancell who was taken to Westminster Hospital with severe injuries. While cleaning the floor of the house where she worked, a steel point projecting from her crinoline stabbed her deeply in the leg in several places, inflicting wounds so serious that doctors doubted they could save the limb.

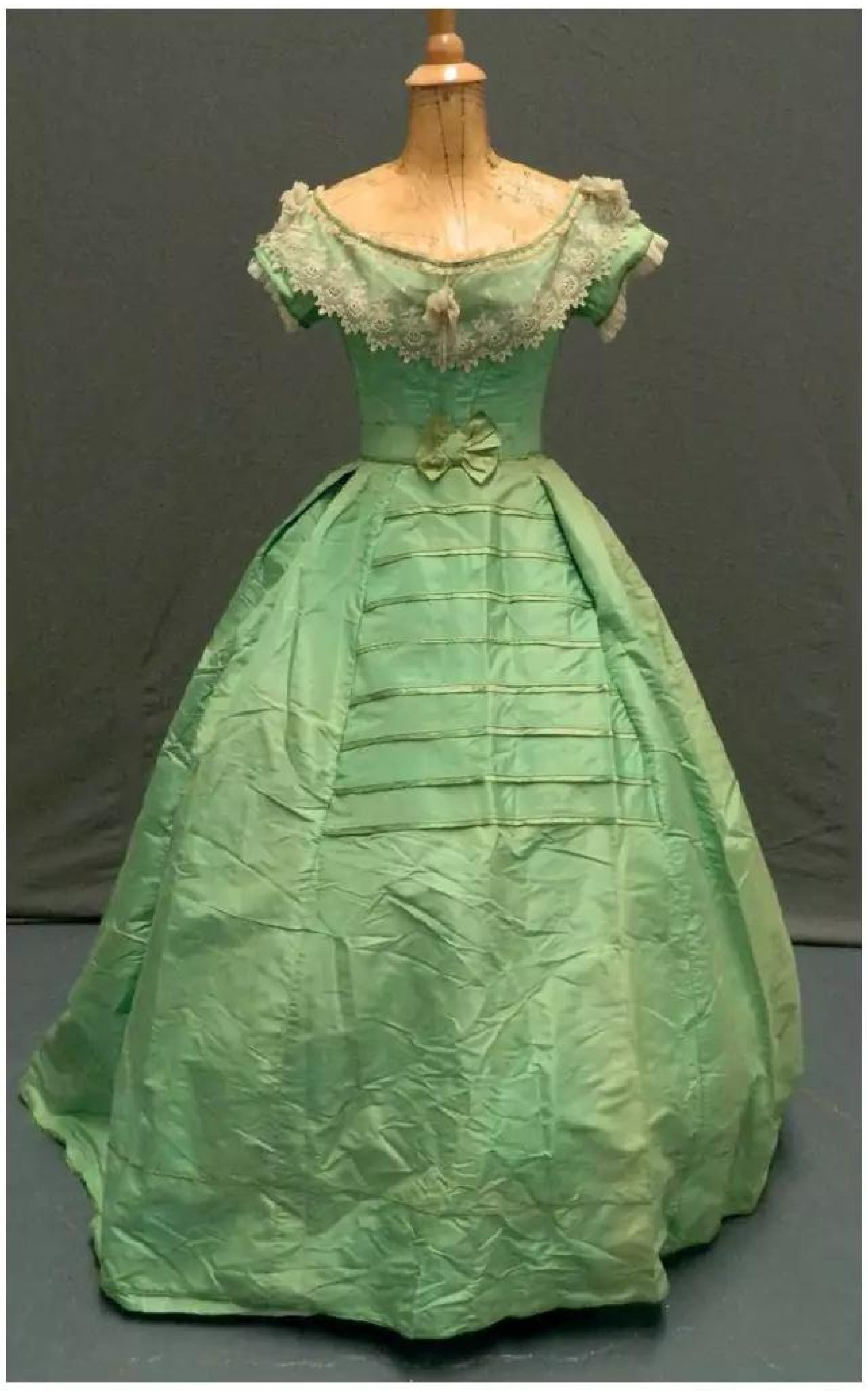
Even children were not immune. An April 1861 press report records:

> *The dangerous custom of dressing children in the prevailing fashion of the day was this week exemplified by an accident which occurred to a girl, nine years of age, the daughter of Mr Delamere, architect, residing in Harrington Square, who was amusing herself with some companions on the pavement when her crinoline was caught by the wheel of a cab which was rapidly passing, and she was dragged beneath it. The vehicle passed completely over her, and but faint hopes are entertained of her recovery.*

Another incident, while not so lethal, sounds quite unpleasant enough:

> *[A] party of boys and girls went on a pleasure boat to some public gardens... On the grounds in question there are several hives of bees, and in stooping in the vicinity of these, one of the girls' crinolines hooked over the top of a hive, and when the poor girl, ignorant of*


54 PUNCH, OR THE LONDON CHARIVARI. [February 8, 1862
THE ARSENIC WALTZ.
The new Dance of Death. (Dedicated to the Green Wreath and Dress-Mongers.)



ABOVE LEFT: The deadly effects of arsenic dyes in an 1862 *Punch* cartoon. **ABOVE RIGHT:** A Paris Green 'arsenic gown'. **BELOW:** Barmaid Sarah Ann Henley, whose attempt at suicide by jumping from the Clifton Suspension Bridge failed when her crinoline apparently acted as a parachute and slowed her fall.

the fact, walked away, down came the hive, of course. The whole corps d'arme, trapped within the crinolines, instantly set upon their unwitting assailant, who was obliged to run for it and eventually to take refuge in a pool of water. From thence she was drawn and, being badly stung, she was taken home to bed, where she lay in some pain for a few days. Our correspondent says she is now quite recovered.

And it wasn't always the crinoline-wearer who suffered the consequences. In Bradford, John Rhodes, a hatter's errand boy, accidentally got his foot entangled in a passing woman's crinoline, which wrenched him off his feet, causing his ankle to be broken on a kerbstone. An even worse fate was suffered by 60-year-old John Wright in Sheffield, who got his hobnail boots caught on a passing crinoline and was thrown to the ground; he was left with a severely broken leg, the bones almost protruding through the skin.

Startlingly, the structure of crinolines in this period was not the only threat to the wearer's health – even their colour could prove deadly. A particularly fashionable shade for the fabric at this time was Paris Green, a bright, long-lasting green made popular by Empress Eugenie of France, who wore a stunning dress of this colour to the opera. Unfortunately, the colour was copper(II) acetate triarsenite, made by combining copper and arsenic compounds. This is the same arsenic compound that was present in the legendary poisonous wallpaper that allegedly killed Napoleon and was also known to be a very effective rat poison. Women wearing dresses coloured with this dye were not just breathing fumes from wallpaper, but having the toxic compound pressed into their skin, which led to arsenic poisoning. At best, this resulted in poor appetite, constant headaches, and an anæmic pallor, but it could also lead to painful lesions, turn the whites of the eyes green and potentially kill, one eighth of a teaspoon being a fatal dose. Compared to slow arsenic poisoning, fire seems almost a mercy.

PARACHUTES AND PLUNDER

However, crinolines were not all bad. Sarah Ann Henley, a young barmaid from Bristol, attempted suicide by leaping from the Clifton Suspension Bridge while wearing a crinoline. The bridge is almost 75 metres (246ft) high, and a fall from it was almost invariably fatal; but Sarah Ann survived when her crinoline acted like a parachute, slowing the pace of her fall and causing her to float away from the water and land on the muddy bank (see **FT321:76-77**). Crinolines were also a boon for shoplifters, who could stash incredible amounts of swag in their clothing. Margaret Toole was arrested for robbing a drapers shop and found to have nine black silk mantles and two coloured silk dresses beneath her crinoline; Eliza Dresser from Hull was apparently frequently remanded for stealing large amounts of bed linen beneath hers, and was once arrested with a full set of steel fire-irons suspended from her waist under her crinoline. Even more audacious were crinoline smugglers. Elizabeth Barbara Lorinz from Holland was arrested for smuggling 5lb (2.3kg) of cigars, 9lb (4kg) of tobacco, a quantity of tea and a bottle of gin, all concealed beneath her crinoline, and in 1858 Ellen Care was found to be smuggling 22lb (10kg) of cigars under hers.

By the mid-1860s, though, the fashion for crinolines was on the wane, to be replaced by the less hazardous bustle. The long litany of crinoline tragedies peters out accordingly, but they were still claiming the occasional victim as late as 1930, when Nita Foy, a dancer appearing in a period drama at Twickenham Studios, died in a crinoline fire. She was visiting the actor Donald Calthrop's dressing room wearing her crinoline costume and, tragically, this appeared to have been all too historically accurate: the fabric does not appear to have been flameproofed, and when it brushed an electric fire she was consumed by a sheet of flame and died shortly after, the last entry in the sorry catalogue of crinoline casualties.

A tip of the hat to Diarmid Mogg, from whose excellent Tumblr 'The Penny Newsman' (http://diarmidmogg.tumblr.com/), many of these newspaper reports were sourced.

For more on the dangers posed by crinolines, as well as make-up and hair styles, see Maria J Pérez Cuervo, "Fashion Victims", **FT345:44-49.** See also *Crinoline: Fashion's Most Magnificent Disaster* by Dennis Pellerin and Brian May, 2016, available from The London Stereoscopic Company.

IAN SIMMONS is a longtime fortean and FT's News Editor. He lives in Essex.

The haunted bedstead of King's Lynn

DR PAUL LEE unearths the forgotten story of an unusual Norfolk haunting

F a few days in 1902 a house in King's Lynn caused a short-lived sensation, which was reported well beyond its Norfolk environs.

On or about 26 May, a family from Norwich moved into a dwelling in Windsor Terrace and almost immediately were beset by paranormal pandemonium. On that first night, the young occupants of a certain bed in the back bedroom rushed from their room, after "a ghostly visitor" had given the bedstead "a good shaking… a fit of St Vitus's dance as it were" that flung them from the mattress. Then they saw a shadowy figure, with two big fiery eyes staring at them…

Trying to convince the children to go back to the bed, their father saw the bedstead shake and heard a sound resembling "the rushing of the wind" or "the rustling of a gown". His wife sensed the approach of an apparition and threw herself terrified on a bed in another room.

"Watch parties" were organised, and a number of witnesses observed the phenomena. They heard the rushing sounds and saw the bedstead shake; one person was pitched out of the room. A wager was made to one witness ("two bob to one") that he dare not stay in the room. After turning the lights off, he managed 10 minutes before the bed started to heave beneath him and he left hurriedly. It was noted that activity seemed to occur around 11.15 to 11.30pm.

The opportunity to witness paranormal goings-on enticed visitors to the house. Within a day or so, 300-400 people had congregated outside, staying until 3am. The crowd debated whether it was a genuine ghost or a trick worked by electricity. It would seem that the hubbub was too much for the supposed spook and "the attention of such a large number of people to the house had the effect of soothing the troubled feelings of the ghostly visitor". An invitation to the press to perform a vigil in the haunted bedroom on the 28th was cancelled due to the presence of the large crowds; the husband explained that he wanted the house shut for a day or two so that interest would dissipate. On that evening, the police cleared the throng.

They saw a shadowy figure with big fiery eyes staring at them…

The police had good reason to be wary of such a congregation; some 30 years previously, stories of a ghost in the nearby park ('The Walks') had seen the area besieged by hundreds of people armed with cudgels and stones and "hooting to a most furious extent for hours in succession, and to the great annoyance of the neighbourhood". Police barricaded the park to prevent disturbances and it later transpired that the phantom was nothing more than a naturalist using a lantern to attract moths. A further misidentified spook in the same area was not so fortunate when some of the North End fishermen decided to investigate a ghost report after women and children had been frightened: a poor bystander had to be conveyed to hospital after being set upon by the baying mob.

The chronology of events is somewhat confusing, but by the end of the month the family had vacated their short-lived home (complete with bedstead). They had only had a single night's respite from the phantom mischief. But there was certainly no shortage of applicants to take over the tenancy of the house.

A bizarre conclusion to the whole affair came on 6 June with the jubilant announcement in the papers that the mystery had been solved. Neighbours had heard a strange flapping noise issuing from the empty house and traced the sound to a starling that had built its nest up a chimney and had become trapped inside one of the rooms. The bird was captured and placed in the hands of an ornithologist, and the avian intruder was offered as a culprit for the 'hauntings'; consequently the mystery evaporated and the press and public, seemingly satisfied, moved on to other stories. An article in a Norfolk paper proclaimed, with more than a hint of irony, that, "It must have been a very strong imagination to have moved the bedstead in the manner described by those who were so frightened by the visitor."

If the intention was to placate the curious with bunkum, it worked, and the demonstrably ridiculous explanation was accepted; obviously, it explained none of the observed phenomena, but there was no impetus to pursue the story.

Over 120 years on, trying to ascertain further details has proven fruitless; the family seem not to have spoken further about their brief brush with the uncanny, and nothing more was reported in the press. Given that the previous head of the household was described as a railway guard, it has been possible to determine via census returns that the house was 6 Windsor Terrace, although press stories that prior occupants included "a demented child" confined to one of the bedrooms (the same room in which a man was said to have died from terrible injuries) have proven impossible to corroborate. There is nothing on record concerning previous or successive occupants of the house.

Windsor Terrace, and indeed the whole area, has since been extensively remodelled, and any houses and vestiges of the 1902 saga have long since been obliterated. All that we are left with is a mystery, and a perfect example of how the press and public can be satisfied by any proffered solution, no matter how asinine.

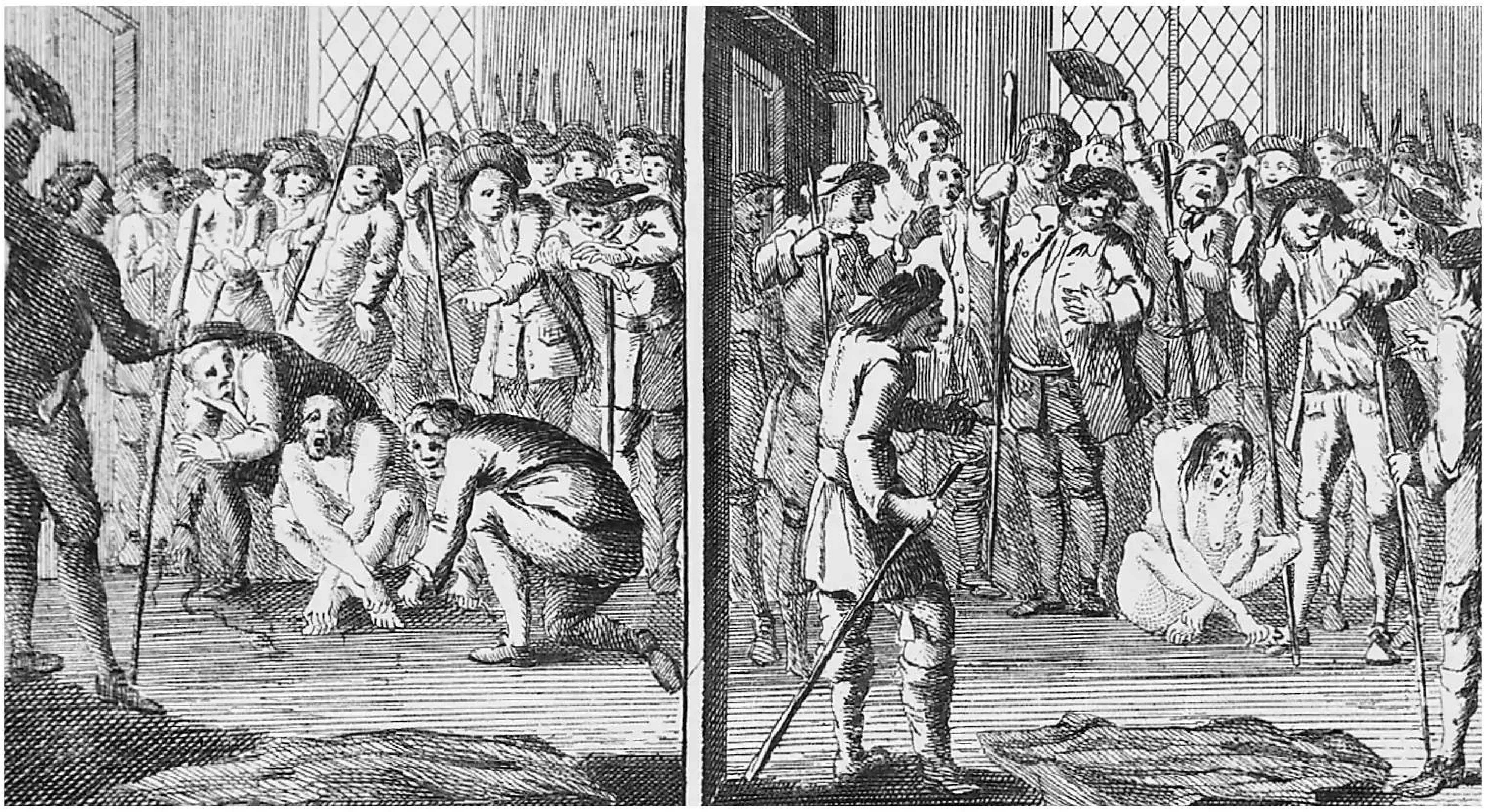
SOURCES

Eastern Daily Press, 28+29 May, 2 June 1902; *The Lynn Advertiser, Wisbech Constitutional Gazette and Norfolk and Cambridgeshire Herald*, 30 May 1902; *The Lynn News and County Press for Norfolk, Isle of Ely and South Lincolnshire*, 31 May, 7 June 1902; *Norwich Mercury*, 31 May 1902; *Eastern Evening News*, 6 June 1902. The story also featured in other papers, sometimes with a few more stray details not reported in the local press: *Nottingham Evening Post*, 7 June 1902; *South Wales Daily News*, 30 May 1902. See also: *Ghosts and Legends of Lynn*, Alison Gifford, 1987; *The Ghosts of King's Lynn and West Norfolk*, Paul Lee, 2023.

DR PAUL LEE is the author of *The Ghosts of King's Lynn and West Norfolk (2023)*. His website is www.paullee.com.

Nasty, squalid and cruel

MARK GREENER reflects on the horrors of the witch trials and what they reveal about the dark side of human nature



ABOVE: The frontispiece from *The remarkable confession and last dying words of Thomas Colley*, London, 1751

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There is, it seems, a witch for any occasion. Witchcraft "can be seen as an area of criminal law, a manifestation of religious belief or secular power, a sign of social stress, a display of sexual prejudice and fear, [and] a temporary and inexplicable mania," comments historian Rosalind Mitchison. Witch trials and hunts also became, Mitchison notes, "a nasty and squalid manifestation of cruelty".[1] Indeed, as Tracy Borman points out in her book on the English witch hunts, people in authority could "indulge their sadistic fantasies" during witch trials and interrogations.[2]

Witch trials haunt our consciousness, part of the current penchant for retrospective justice. Pagan books promoting eco-consciousness and self-empowerment fill our shelves. Stories involving witches top our viewing habits: we after all need escapist entertainment. But perhaps the fascination also persists because witch hunts allow us to glimpse the dark side of our personalities we'd prefer remained hidden. Perhaps witch trials critique our often unquestioning obsequiousness to authority, or highlight the herd mentality that means we blindly follow our peers, neighbours or social media echo chambers. The nasty, squalid cruelty of the witch hunts contains lessons that resonate today.

It's hard to image just how deeply the witch trials struck into the heart of communities. During the 1580s, witchcraft accounted for 13 per cent of all criminal hearings in England, for example. Across continental Europe up to 100,000 people were tried for witchcraft between the early 15th century and the middle of the 17th century.

The passion for witch hunting soon crossed the Atlantic. In colonial North America, the widespread belief in witches, Katherine Howe suggests, "took on a marked role in a wilderness of uncertain safety and within fragile communities".[3] The trials tended to focus on "economics and family life" – the butter that does not churn, the cow that doesn't yield milk, the difficult childbirth – and, critically, those who were not fully part of the community. Gore Vidal noted that the "disgruntled Puritans" who left England for the Americas created a "quasitheocratic society" that persecuted people "for religious heresies, witchcraft [and] sexual misbehaviour".[4] In 1692, for example, courts in the Massachusetts Bay Colony accused between 144 and 185 people of witchcraft in 25 towns and villages, including Salem. These courts executed 14 women, five men and two dogs for witchcraft; they also accused a five-year girl. She survived the ordeal, but went insane.[5]

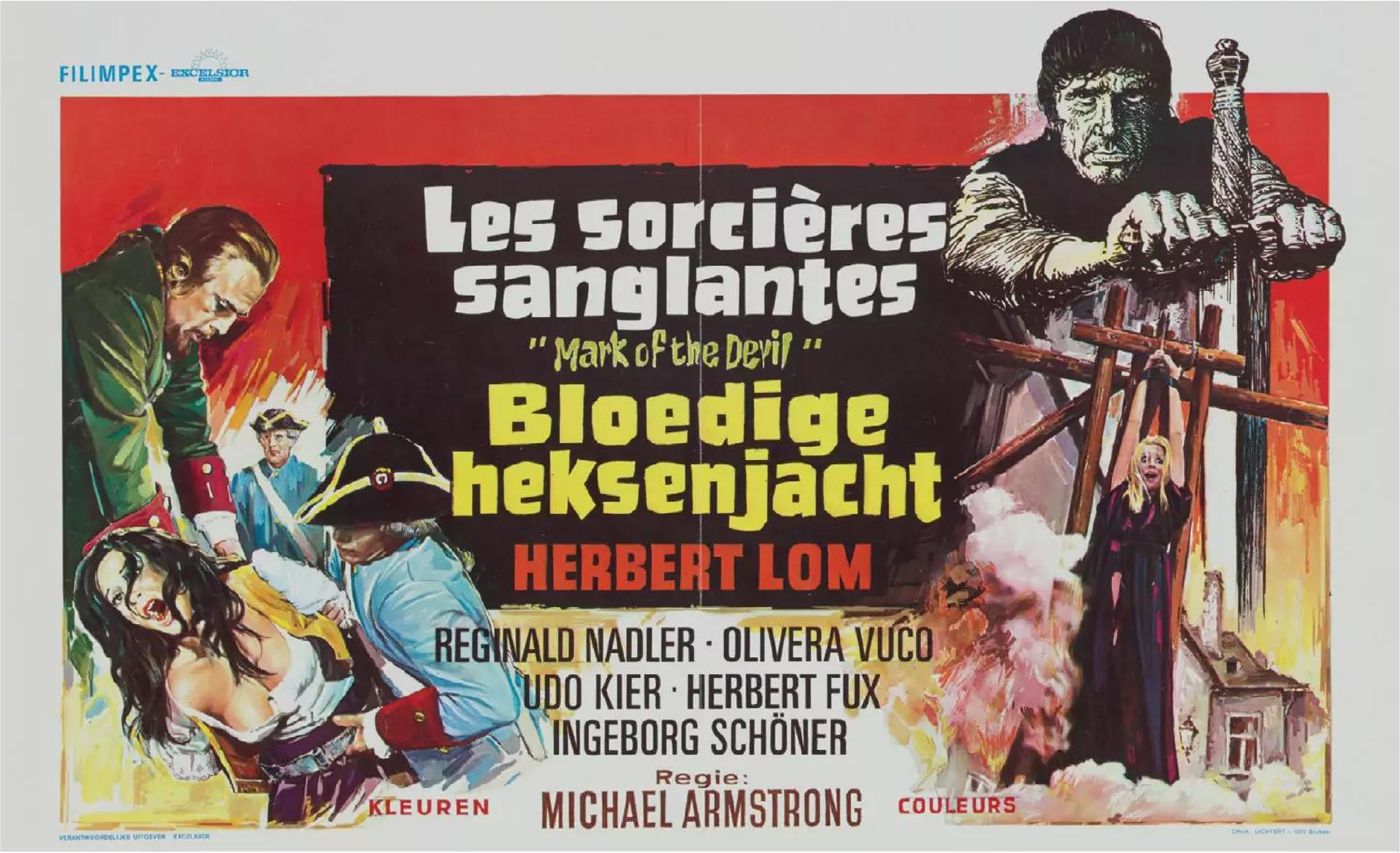
> *Meanwhile, sex and gender roles were never far from the surface*

The evidence behind the death sentences was usually little more than hearsay or guilt by association. Take the case of Katharina, Johannes Kepler's mother. Johannes discovered that planets moved in ellipses and defined the three laws of planetary motion. On 29 December 1615, Kepler received a letter from his sister informing him that several influential people in Leonberg, now in southern Germany, had accused his mother of witchcraft. The Leonberg authorities accused Katharina, who made herbal remedies, of brewing poison that made "friends and neighbours mortally ill". Her son Heinrich – who, even allowing for combat stress, seems to have been a thoroughly unpleasant piece of work – returned home ill and poor in 1614 after 25 years as a soldier. When Katharina couldn't put meat on the table for a meal in the middle of a hard winter, Heinrich lost his temper and called his mother a witch. Unfortunately, others overheard.[6]

Katharina escaped death, largely because of her son's advocacy and contacts. Thousands of others were not so lucky. Between the early 15th century and the middle of the 17th century, at least 40,000 supposed witches were put to death in Europe. The Scottish authorities alone executed perhaps 4,000 supposed witches between the middle of the 16th and 18th centuries.[7]

Yet even at the height of the hysteria, some authors expressed reservations. For example, in *The Discouerie of Witchcraft* (1584) Reginald Scot was uneasy about the legal process and often felt sorry for the victims. As Howe notes, Scot saw many supposed witches as "often poor or mentally ill, uneducated, objects of fear and disgust within their communities, and unable to defend themselves". They deserved "Christian charity and compassion" rather than the noose, stake or prison cell.[8]

Meanwhile, sex and gender roles were never far from the surface: another case of *plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose* (the more things change the more they remain the same). In a patriarchal society where women often remained marginalised, witch trials placed women centre stage as accusers and accused. Some 92 per cent of those accused of witchcraft in England during the 16th and 17th century were female. In the Home Countries, women were up to 15 times more likely to give evidence in a trial for witchcraft than for other felonies.[9]



ABOVE: The sadistic and sexual overtones of the witch hunt are well to the fore in the 1970s German film *Mark of the Devil*.

Those accused were typically, Stacy Schiff notes, "outliers and deviants, cantankerous scolds and choleric foot-stampers". She describes Sarah Good, a 38-year-old beggar, who was the first person interrogated during the 1692 Salem trials and one of the first five hanged for witchcraft, as "sullen, combative, unkempt" and "caustic at best, insolent at worst".[10] Katharina Kepler was a widow, a social status that could evoke hostility and tap into what Ulinka Rublack calls "pervasive cultural fears of old women" who, according to the contemporary view, envied other people's beauty, fertility or wealth and wanted to cause them harm.[11] Scot describes a typical witch as "old, lame, bleary-eyed, pale, foul, and full of wrinkles, poor, sullen, superstitious and papists; or such as know no religion". The witch usually "waxeth odious and tedious to her neighbours".[12]

Women's central role as accuser and accused is, as Stacy Schiff notes about Salem, "a tacit salute to unsettling female power". The accusations in Salem rested on the 'evidence' of adolescent females, a group Schiff describes as "traditionally… vulnerable, mute and disenfranchised". Being placed centre-stage arguably empowered women, but no doubt helped drive the "rippling sexual undercurrents" in the Salem trials. After all, however unacceptable to modern views, Salem focused attention on a group of adolescent, virgin girls.

Indeed, sex in thought or act permeated witch trials and hunts. In Virginia, accusers claimed that the supposed witch Joan Wright threatened to compel a servant girl to dance "stark naked" if she did not provide "lightwood". Borman notes that witch hunters, gaolers, priests and others in authority could rape the accused and "indulge their sadistic fantasies" without recrimination. A French priest, for instance, applied hot fat repeatedly to an accused witch's eyes, armpits, thighs, stomach and vagina. Commonly, suspected witches were stripped to the waist and whipped, their breasts on display. Borman suggests that such sadistic fantasies and behaviour may be one reason behind the "bewildering rapid spread of the witch craze" and why the hunts persisted for so long.[13]

Cruelty and sexuality, of course, overlap. But even leaving sexual sadism aside, witches endured terrible torments in the attempts to extract a confession. During the 1692 Salem hysteria Giles Corey, an obstinate, argumentative farmer in his seventies, refused to confess. (Although he'd previously accused his wife of witchcraft.) So, the Salem court condemned him to a torture from the Middle Ages: *Peine forte et dure* (strong and hard punishment). Even the mere prospect of this dreadful torment often extracted a confession, true or not.

Corey lay near-naked, spreadeagled on the Massachusetts soil covered by a plank. The authorities placed rocks and lead on the plank to break his will – and probably his ribs. If that wasn't bad enough, during the first day, he received only "three morsels of the worst bread" and, on the second day, "three draughts of standing water". Despite pleas from a friend, Corey refused to confess. After about two days, as Corey approached death, his tongue lolled from his mouth. The sheriff pushed the tongue back with his cane. Corey remains the only person in American history that we know endured this dreadful punishment.[14]

Puritans didn't have a monopoly on torment. European torturers pulled fingernails off using pincers; they then stuck needles up to their heads into the damaged fingertips. Wedges were driven into encased legs, shattering shins and ankles; according to one contemporary account, the "blood and marrow spurted forth in great abundance".

Some witchfinders preferred psychological rather than physical torture. They tried confinement, isolation, intimidation and sleep deprivation. After a while, sleep deprivation, the *tormentum insomniæ*, led to dreaming while awake and hallucinations. During the 1660s, witchfinders kept a suspected witch called John Lowes awake for several nights making him run around the room until he was breathless. After a short while, they repeated the torment. By the end, the manor's lord and magistrate commented that Lowes "was weary of his life and was scarce sensible of what he said, or did".[15]

The witch hunts and trials offers stark reminders of our capacity for inhumanity, the way we can be swept along by societal pressure and our intrinsic fear of outsiders. Schiff comments that Salem "glares at us when fear paralyses reason, when we overreact or overcorrect, when we hunt down or deliver up the alien and the seditious".[16] The history of witchcraft offers us a glimpse into the darkness that lurks in us all. The trials remind us that our faith in government and community leaders can be misplaced. As Howe notes "this persistent reminder of the inhumanity that a small community and its learned and trusted government can show all its own members, lingers among us, a threat of what we could at any time still become".[17]

NOTES

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3 Katherine Howe (ed), *The Penguin Book of Witches*, Penguin, 2014.
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5 Stacy Schiff, *The Witches: Salem, 1692: A History*, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2015.
6 Ulinka Rublack, *The Astronomer and The Witch: Johannes Kepler's Fight for his Mother*, Oxford University Press, 2015.
7 Borman, op. cit.
8 Howe, op. cit.
9 Borman, op. cit.
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MARK GREENER is a medical writer and the clinical editor of *Pharmacy Magazine*. He writes regularly for FT.

THIS CHRISTMAS, STEP INTO THE STRANGE

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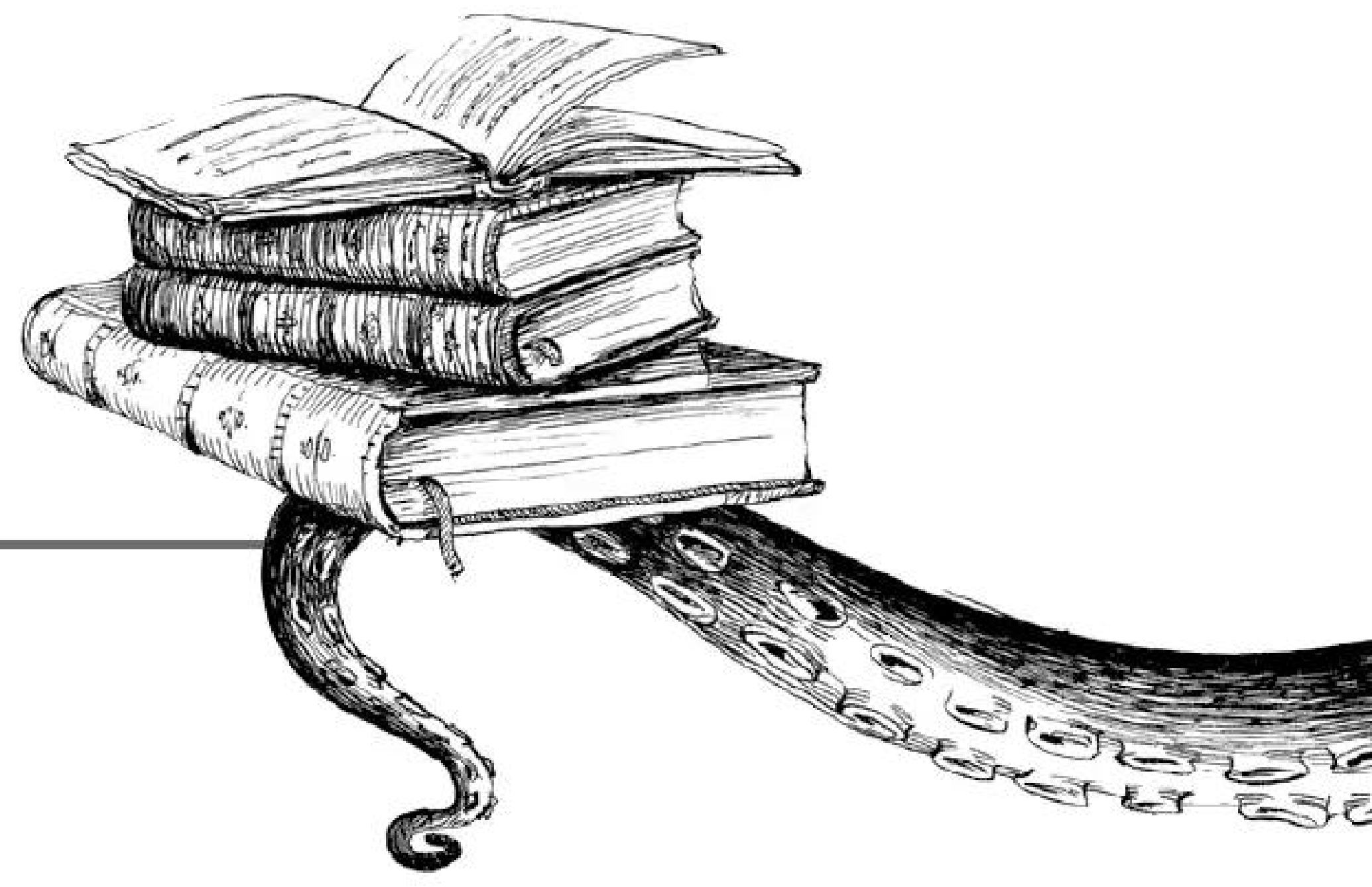


Embracing the anomalous

Jeffrey Kripal's latest book is an intellectual route-map towards exploring authentic anomalous, paranormal and mystical experiences ostracised by orthodox science, says **Bob Rickard**

How to Think Impossibly

About Souls, UFOs, Time, Belief and Everything Else

Jeffrey J Kripal

University of Chicago Press 2024

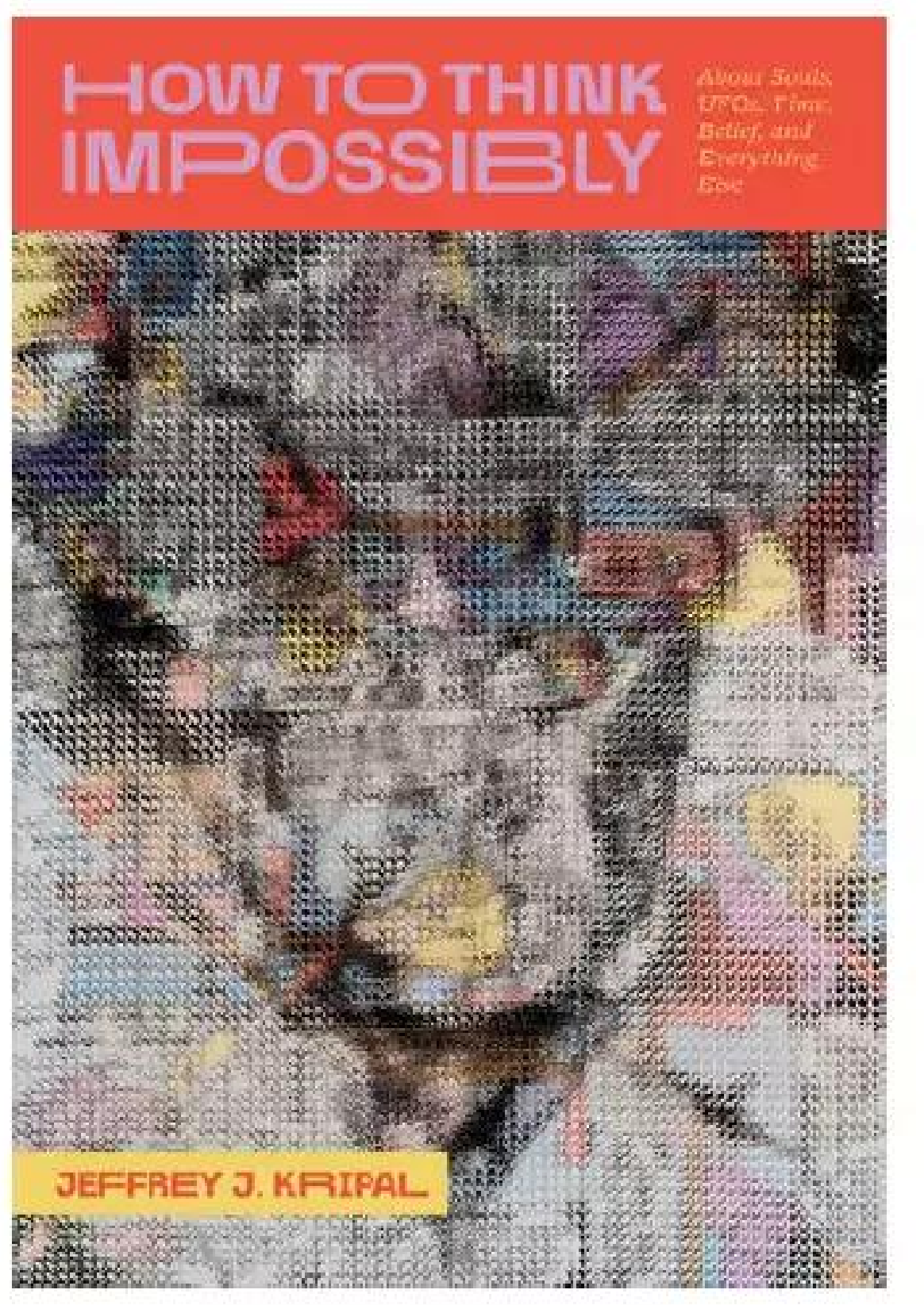
Hb, 312pp, £28, ISBN 9780226833682

There is something, up ahead in the future, called "superhumanities". It attempts a new approach to what Fort called a "more inclusive science", paying attention to its exceptions as well as to its core principles. It is a concerted academic discipline comprehending the totality of our existence between the extremes of our inner and outer sensoria, from the furthest stars down to infinitesimal quantum eddies, and (importantly) embracing the ostracised realms of authentic anomalous, paranormal and mystical experience so energetically cancelled by a cynical scientific-materialism.

In this sequel to his *Authors of the Impossible* (2010) and *The Superhumanities* (2022), Jeffrey Kripal sets out an intellectual route-map towards the new discipline. It is a very dense, philosophical book and the author – an acclaimed historian of religion – is speaking directly to the reader. Aware of its demanding nature, Kripal has the patience to unfold his remarkable accounts of "high strangeness" experiences gathered from his acquaintances and correspondents.

What does he mean by the "impossible"? Fundamentally, we have no direct experience of the physical world that is not mediated through our senses and intellect. Our shared "everyday" consensus about the "physical" world is a social construction, he writes, that has evolved, almost continuously, to allow us to navigate and prosper in the "objective" environment. Kripal supports the unorthodox view that authentic personal encounters with "impossible" phenomena (levitation, bilocation, telepathy, precognition, apports and so on) represent interactions with a different form of "reality" adjacent to our familiar objective-subjective world. "Impossible" events become what Fort called "the Damned", because we have no agreement about what they are and how to process them.

It is not for lack of positive evidence, either. Authentic documentary evidence of encounters with the "impossible" – notes fellow historian of religion Carlos Eire (his study of levitation was reviewed in FT440) – has been carefully recorded since the 16th century, "the era that gave birth to aggressive scepticism and empirical science". Kripal adds: "The subject has been historically known as 'mystical' (derived from the Greek meanings of 'initiate', 'non-dual', 'empty' and 'infinite'." Similarly, there is suggestion here of "groundless" in the sense used by Tantric description of the ultimate state of being. Truly Fort's sense of things "existing somewhere between extremes" that are themselves purely Platonic.



"Impossible" experiences are, typically, "contrary to contemporary thinking based upon the subjective/objective division and the foundation of modern humanities and science", Kripal continues. They "are not quite humanistic, subjective or social; but neither are they entirely material, physical or empirical". They sandwich our everyday world at both ends; and that is one reason why "its many appearances are so often unintelligible or blurred. No longer can we trust the simplistic unidirectional formula 'physical causes mental', so the job of 'thinking impossibly' is to recognise the extremes and hold them together."

> *Kripal castigates the rationalist-materialist who refuses to even look at the evidence*

Kripal castigates the position of the rationalist-materialist orthodox which so frequently (and loudly) prides itself on refusing to even look at the accumulated evidence. The image of Galileo inviting the clerics to see "the impossible" for themselves is relevant here. Obdurate "skeptics" say it is our job to convince them, but very few are willing to commit to the study needed. That is not to say this project is anti-science. Kripal points to maths and quantum phenomena as, so far, the clearest signs "that the inner and outer worlds of human experience correspond".

Kripal represents an "invisible college" of academics who say: "Nevertheless, authentic 'impossible' experiences do happen and are therefore real." I used 'invisible' deliberately because what he is promoting resembles the correspondence network of early European scientists that culminated in the foundation of the Royal Society in 1662. Kripal and his colleagues have, since 2014, hosted academically supported meetings called Archives of the Impossible – https://tinyurl.com/yc3bvad9 – to help formulate "a new theory of the imagination" to cope with "this shocking sense of discovery". Interestingly, Kripal says the idea came out of a meeting with Jacques Vallée, who titled his 1975 book on scientific interest in UFOs, *The Invisible College*.

"Trained intellectuals who experience the impossible" – and Kripal gives a great many fascinating examples throughout the book – "are commonly shocked and often say the same thing, 'it is not what we thought!'" They liken such experiences to "discovering new knowledge, not some reconstruction or creation", … more like "revelations" in the mystical and religious context.

This could be the reason, he proposes, that quantum mechanics and mystical literature – remember *The Tao of Physics* from back in 1975? – correspond so powerfully. They are finally speaking of different aspects of the same deeper reality, one from the outside, the other from inside, Kripal says. The test of whether they are truly pointing to or emerging from the same reality is that they would correspond, "… and they do!" Kripal then examines those professors who turned towards mystical literature to make sense of what quantum mechanics implies. "They knew immediately where to go," and promises a forthcoming book on this.

This is our Galileo moment! There is so much more to say about Kripal's message … but it is important that you discover that for yourself. By you, I mean anyone interested in the wider, more philosophical aspects of forteana and "reality".

★★★★★

Standing proud

Rob Ixer finds surprising answers to the age of Dorset's famous priapic giant

A Date with the Two Cerne Giants

Reinvestigating an Iconic British Hill Figure

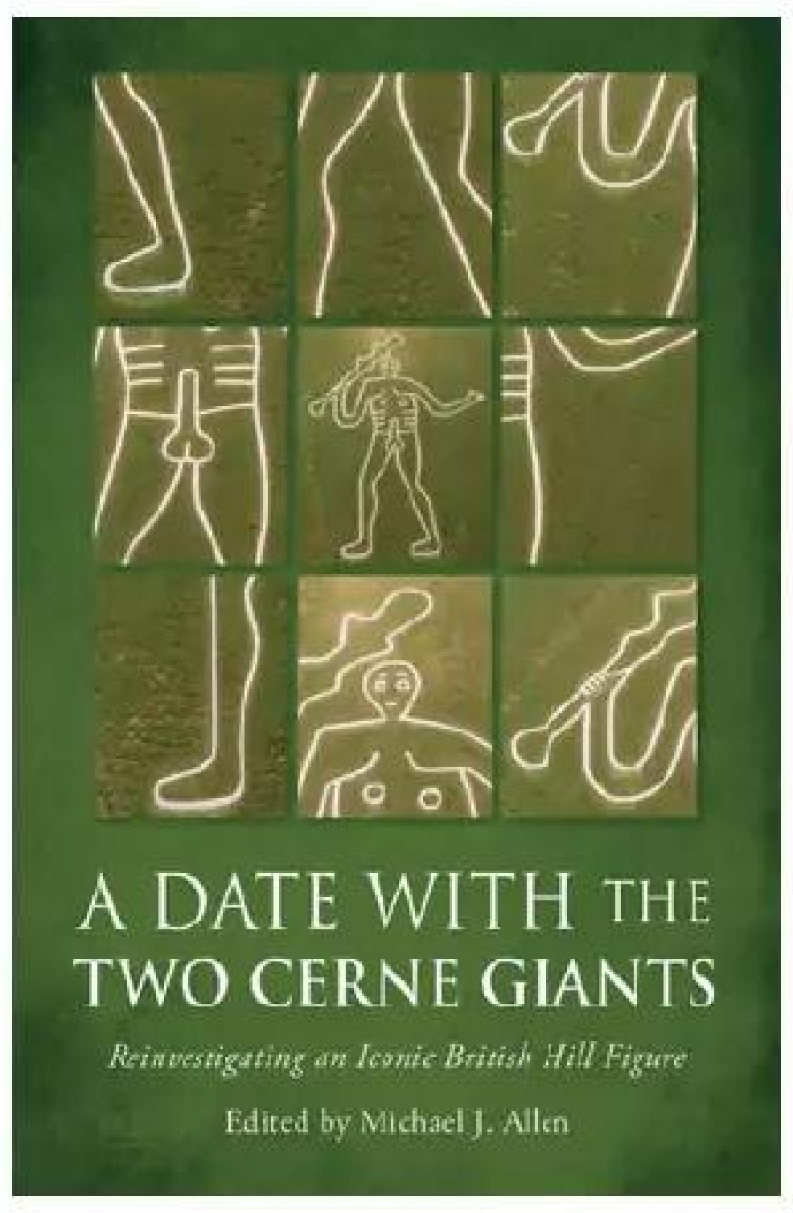
ed. Michael J Allen

Oxbow Books 2024

Pb, 376pp, £24.95, ISBN 9781914427374

Despite the "excited young man" being sky-clad and seemingly baring all, he has retained a metaphorical (and possibly physical) mantle of mystery.

The first half of this book on the National Trust excavations in 2020 describes, in enormous detail, the archæological field work and excavations, literally to shine a light on some of the quandaries. Most especially when and how he was created, but also providing partial answers as to why, plus how he was able to appear and disappear for centuries, whilst shape-shifting and slowly moving downhill.


A DATE WITH THE TWO CERNE GIANTS
Reinvestigating an Iconic British Hill Figure
Edited by Michael J. Allen

The archæological investigation of a seemingly simple chalk-cut figure that has been refreshed/rechalked on a number of occasions is surprisingly taxing and exacting, especially as geophysics seems to yield mixed results.

Three creation dates, namely late Iron Age, 2nd-century Roman or mid to late 17th century have been in contention for decades, with the various, quite plausible, suggestions vigorously defended. Hence a proven first millennium Anglo-Saxon date for both giants (the shade of an earlier giant is now smothered beneath the present one), was an astonishment and for many of the big names in the dating game an embarrassment. The middle section of the book, complete with attempts at revisionism by said authorities, discusses the dating implications at length; as a result William of Orange, Oliver Cromwell and Celtic gods are eliminated but proud classical Hercules remains in play. This section is, by far, the most entertaining (and least earnest) read.

Soon after being cut he was lost, presumably forgotten, as he remained unrecorded for half a millennium; but (in marked contrast to the fate of "my friend Billy's ten-foot willy"), it was during a remembrance in the early 20th century that the giant had six foot (1.8m) added to his phallus (by subsuming his belly button); the reason for that penile enhancement remains unknown. Other, possibly original, additions (and reflecting the iconography of Hercules) to the outstretched arm of the giant, are a speculative cloak draping about it and a severed head dangling below. Geophysics and limited excavation still leave their presence unresolved.

The final section of the book is a series of articles, some quite polemical, comparing and contrasting "the big three" chalk cut figures, the Cerne Abbas Giant, the Uffington White Horse and the Long Man of Wilmington alongside numerous other past and present geoglyphs (many equestrian). Although plainly in view, the figures collectively appear to be overlooked by national bodies including those nominally in charge, so are left being curated/refreshed by local people/school children. Rightly the authors are alarmed.

The book is beyond comprehensive/eclectic in scope, it is well rounded, excellently illustrated (the photograph of the Giant covered in grazing sheep looking like falling snow is surreal and wonderful). It is an all-you-ever-needed-to-know account of Britain's white-washed figures.

It is to be hoped it girds the loins of the figures' guardians, bestirring them into positive action.

★★★★

Doma Doma Doma Blum Blum Blum

Conversations with other animals

Luke Thompson

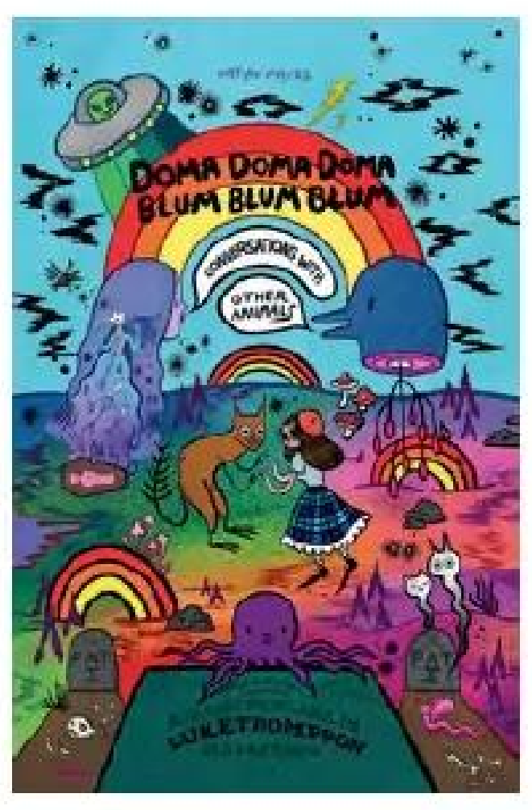
Ortac Press 2024

Pb, 254pp, £12.99, ISBN 9781738466719

The title comes from a recorded utterance of Gef, that Talking Mongoose, as his vocalisations started to sound less like "barking, growling, hissing" and more like "near-sensical" words. The author notes the same phenomenon in spirit communication, including some of his own ouija sessions with a spirit claiming to be Gef.

Thompson observes that Gef has much in common with a witch's familiar, visible to some people but not to others. Convicted Essex witch Joan Prentice allegedly had a ferret for a familiar.

Was Gef a familiar, and if so, whose? *Doma Doma* notes that Manx folklore has several types of familiar spirits that warn of things to come.



Wittgenstein believed that animals would perceive the world so differently that communication between animals and humans would be impossible. Our views on talking to animals, believes Thompson, are a reflection of our human exceptionalism. We imagine we are somehow set apart from other animals because we have a soul and so on.

Fictional models for human-animal communication include multiple and conflicting versions of the "language theory" of animals within Hugh Lofting's Doctor Doolittle books – sometimes one universal language for all animals, sometimes one language for each species.

There is also animal language change – Doolittle converses with the 70,000-year-old Great Glass Sea Snail, but only through three cross-phylum interpreters; no living animals can still speak the ancient Snail's language.

There's examination of how understanding and talking to eagles, bears, giant wolves and spiders works in JRR Tolkien's *The Hobbit* and how in Kipling's *The Jungle Book* all the predators share a common language. *Doma Doma* also surveys the numerous accounts of King Solomon commanding the "birds, beasts and reptiles" and of Francis of Assissi communicating with animals and birds.

John C Lilly experimented with dolphin communication (**FT447:42**), injecting LSD into dolphins' brains and inventing the isolation tank. Thompson concludes that Lilly was a poor communicator with humans, and that Lilly's write-up of his mind-bending LSD-fuelled experiences just sound like the addled hippy nonsense they were.

Also, Lilly "had no success in furthering human-dolphin communication at all".

Having made this astute observation, though, Thompson seems to fall into the same trap – much of the middle of the book describes his own drug-free and not very relevant sessions at his local isolation tank.

Many digressions involving pet psychics later, we arrive at talking to dragons and flying saucer contactees who claimed to talk with aliens, John Dee and Edward Kelley's complicated Enochian system for talking to angels and religious speaking in tongues generally.

There are also frustrating brief mentions of Irene Peppenberg, who in the 1970s apparently taught her grey parrot Alex to speak. Alex's last words to Irene before he died were: "You be good. I love you." (See **FT230:28**)

The book is brilliant in places – but there's not that much on actually talking with animals.

Matt Salusbury

★★★

Maurice Nicoll

Forgotten Teacher of the Fourth Way

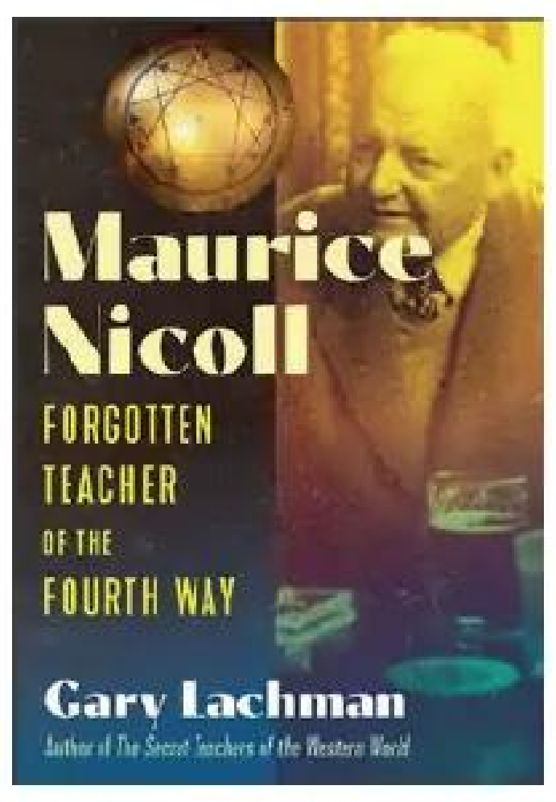
Gary Lachman

Inner Traditions 2024

Hb, 455p, £25, ISBN 9781644119914

Drawing on papers deposited at Edinburgh University by Camilla Copley, daughter of Samuel Copley, a devotee of Maurice Nicoll (1884-1953), Lachman's biography is both frank and exhaustive and far from hagiographic. Documenting the period between 1919 and his death in 1953, Nicoll's diaries provide a unique insight into a complex interior life fraught with sexual, professional, and social anxieties.

Dogged throughout his life by the shadow of his father, a highly respected Scots Presbyterian, an obsession with "unclean thoughts" (masturbation and a prurient interest in working class women) and a contempt for materialist ideology, Nicoll's private disillusionment with modern life is evident throughout his diaries. Lachman deftly interweaves this inner turmoil with a clear account of Nicoll's life, emphasising vastly different public and private personæ.


Maurice Nicoll
FORGOTTEN TEACHER OF THE FOURTH WAY
Gary Lachman
Author of The Secret Teachers of the Western World

A successful writer by 1911 with a West End hit, it was Nicoll's experiences during the First World War that saw him pursue psychiatry under the tutelage of CJ Jung, establishing a Harley Street practice in 1919. And yet, throughout this period, his diaries reveal a man unable to face his own sexual pathology and floundering as the regimen of class and gender distinction begins to erode.

Encountering PD Ouspensky in 1920 and later George Gurdjieff in 1922, Nicoll took on board the physical and spiritual programming that became known as the "Work" – the Fourth Way.

Full of visionary speculation and dream analysis, the diaries from this period mark a radical departure in Nicoll's thinking towards communality, and on his return to London in 1923 he discovered no shortage of (well-heeled!) devotees keen to shed their "time bodies".

Communities established throughout southern England between 1932 and 1953 become the apogee of Nicoll's Fourth Way pedagogy and Lachman's forensic accountancy of this period is fascinating.

Of more interest is how the diaries tell a different tale.

Unable to reconcile his sexual and spiritual dynamics and concerned that his renewed interest in esoteric Christianity took him away from the "Work", Nicoll's life was further complicated with a burgeoning drink problem and a diagnosis of cancer in 1948.

Towards the end of his life a diminishing coterie of followers and his increasing reluctance to engage with them suggest that the project had had limited success.

Attempts to maintain community life following his death met little success and Nicoll's real legacy lies in his published works, most notably *Psychological Commentaries on the Teaching of Gurdjieff and Ouspensky* (1949-1956) and the critically acclaimed *The New Man* (1950).

Lachman's biography is replete with historical and intellectual information regarding spiritual pursuit during the early 20th century.

Highly recommended for scholars of the Fourth Way and those interested in the interpenetration of early psychoanalysis with speculative metaphysics.

Chris Hill

★★★★

Pascagoula 1973

The Hypnosis Transcripts

Philip Mantle

Flying Disk Press 2024

Pb, 362pp, £15.75, ISBN 9798394349997

You have to admire Philip Mantle for being such a dogged UFO investigator.

In recent years his attention has been largely focused on the Pascagoula abduction case of 1973, and in this latest book we get a selection of hypnotic regression sessions with the prime witnesses; Calvin Parker and Charles Hickson.

UFO researcher Dr James Harder interviewed and regressed them only three days after the event, and 19-year-old Parker tells of seeing three creatures with claw-like hands. Three years later John Kraus regressed both of them and their stories largely agreed they were taken on board a UFO by these creatures, although Hickson's answers are slow and hesitant and Parker simply summarises being grabbed.

PASCAGOULA 1973
THE HYPNOSIS TRANSCRIPTS
PHILIP MANTLE

Parker was so stressed by the incident that he generally avoided any further investigations for 20 years. Hickson, on the other hand, had regression sessions with Dr Leo Sprinkle and Dr Harder in 1974 and sessions with Budd Hopkins in 1985 and 1989. Parker had regression sessions with Budd Hopkins in 1993, Kathleen Marden in 1999 and 2019, and Crystal Slaughter in 2022.

Parker in 1993 does tell Hopkins about an alien female inside the craft that puts her finger up his nose, and cuts his right hand – both actions implying she put implants inside him. He also recalls beating her head against a mirror causing blood to come out of her ears. He asserts he has to hunt her and her kind down and kill them. With Marden he tells of seeing this strange woman several times since he was nine years old, and she tried to murder him in 1993.

From the transcriptions of these sessions it is clear that they experienced something traumatic, but under hypnotic regression they do not appear to provide much in terms of detail of the main incident, due to being paralysed and blinded by a light.

As a bonus there is transcription of a regression session with Maria Blair, who claims she also saw three creatures who abducted her and her husband on the same night. She thinks they harvested her DNA so they can use it to look like us and live amongst us undetected.

Whether these accounts reveal fantasies that have brewed over the years or real alien abductions, Mantle has done a brilliant job of tracking down these recordings.

An audio book containing the recordings with a narration by Helen Langford of the text is also available from Flying Disk Press.

Nigel Watson

★★★

The Lake Worth Monster

Lyle Blackburn

LegendScape Publishing 2024

Pb, 167pp, £12.79, ISBN 9871734920666

Lyle Blackburn is a fortean author of some repute with seven excellent books already under his belt.

Most of his work has focused on putative relic hominins like the Fouke Monster and Momo, or in a broader scope bigfoot in the state of Texas.

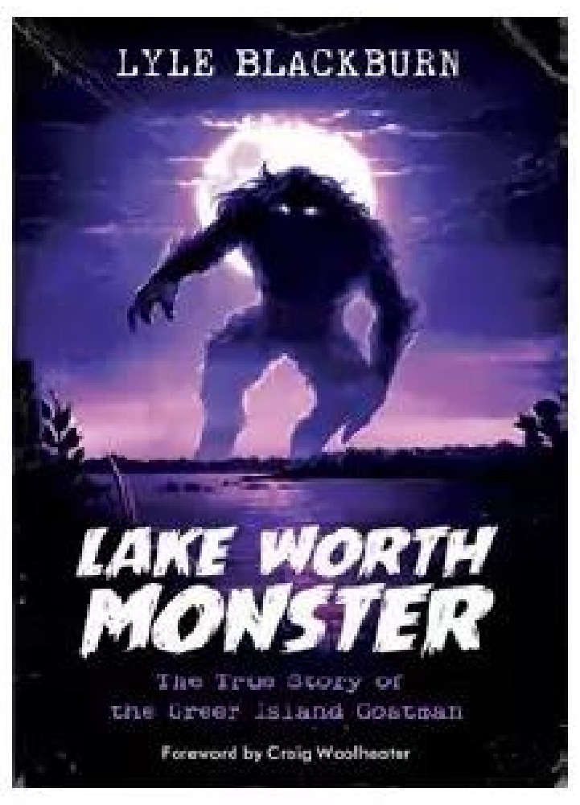
In his latest book Lyle focuses in on the flap of monster sightings around Lake Worth, Texas, in 1969-70.

This case is a weird one. The initial sighting, witnessed by three couples, involved an attack on a car belonging to John Reichart as his wife sat inside it as he fished. A furred, horned, hoofed creature leapt on the car's roof and clawed at Reichart's wife Linda.

This satyr-like beast bears scant resemblance to later accounts of what came to be known as the Lake Worth Monster, that fall in line with the more typical, ape-like sasquatch model.

However, the horned horror is far from unique with similar "goat men" reported from the Old Alton Bridge also in Texas, the Pope Lick Monster of Kentucky and the Maryland goatman.

When the beast returned it seemed to have morphed into a white 7ft 6in (2.3m) Bigfoot, manifesting in front of hundreds of witnesses who had gathered near the Greer Island area after reading newspaper accounts of the Reichart sighting. The albino ape hurled a car wheel and tyre some 500 feet (152m) making a nonsense of claims that the creature was simply kids in an ape suit or goat skin.


LYLE BLACKBURN
LAKE WORTH MONSTER
The True Story of the Greer Island Goatman
Foreword by Craig Woolheater

In fact the sceptical excuses in this case seem even more half-arsed than usual with a "kid in a tinfoil mask" and a "bobcat" blamed for the sightings.

Lyle tracks down and talks to witnesses including Bobby Brooks, who caught the beast on camera and also illustrated Sallie Ann Clarke's self-published and now highly collectable book on the beast. Clarke was in the area as the story unfolded and interviewed witnesses shortly after their sightings. She wrote and published the book in one week and subsequently saw the monster five times herself.

The Lake Worth Monster is a classic fortean flap in the style of Mothman or the Mad Gasser of Mattoon. Something appears, terrifies a community then vanishes leaving nothing but questions in its wake. Fifty-five years on its impact is still felt and Lyle Blackburn does an excellent job of recording the story.

Richard Freeman

★★★★★

Leek-green children

Edward Parnell explores a comprehensive, meticulously referenced and fascinating delve into an 800-year-old classic of fortean folklore

The Green Children of Woolpit

Chronicles, Fairies and Facts in Mediæval England

John Clark

University of Exeter Press 2024. 30 per cent discount with code FORTEAN30 from exeterpress.co.uk

Hb, 260pp, £90, ISBN 9781804131367

The story of two enigmatic, unintelligible green-skinned children, a girl and boy who emerged from out of the earth close to the west Suffolk village of Woolpit at some point around the middle of the 12th century, is a classic example of both forteana and English folklore (particularly fairylore). John Clark, who for many years was the curator of the mediæval collections at the Museum of London, has long been fascinated with this strange tale, and has previously written about it in various periodicals including FT's former sister publication *Fortean Studies*. Here he treats the subject to a serious – and overdue – book-length academic study.

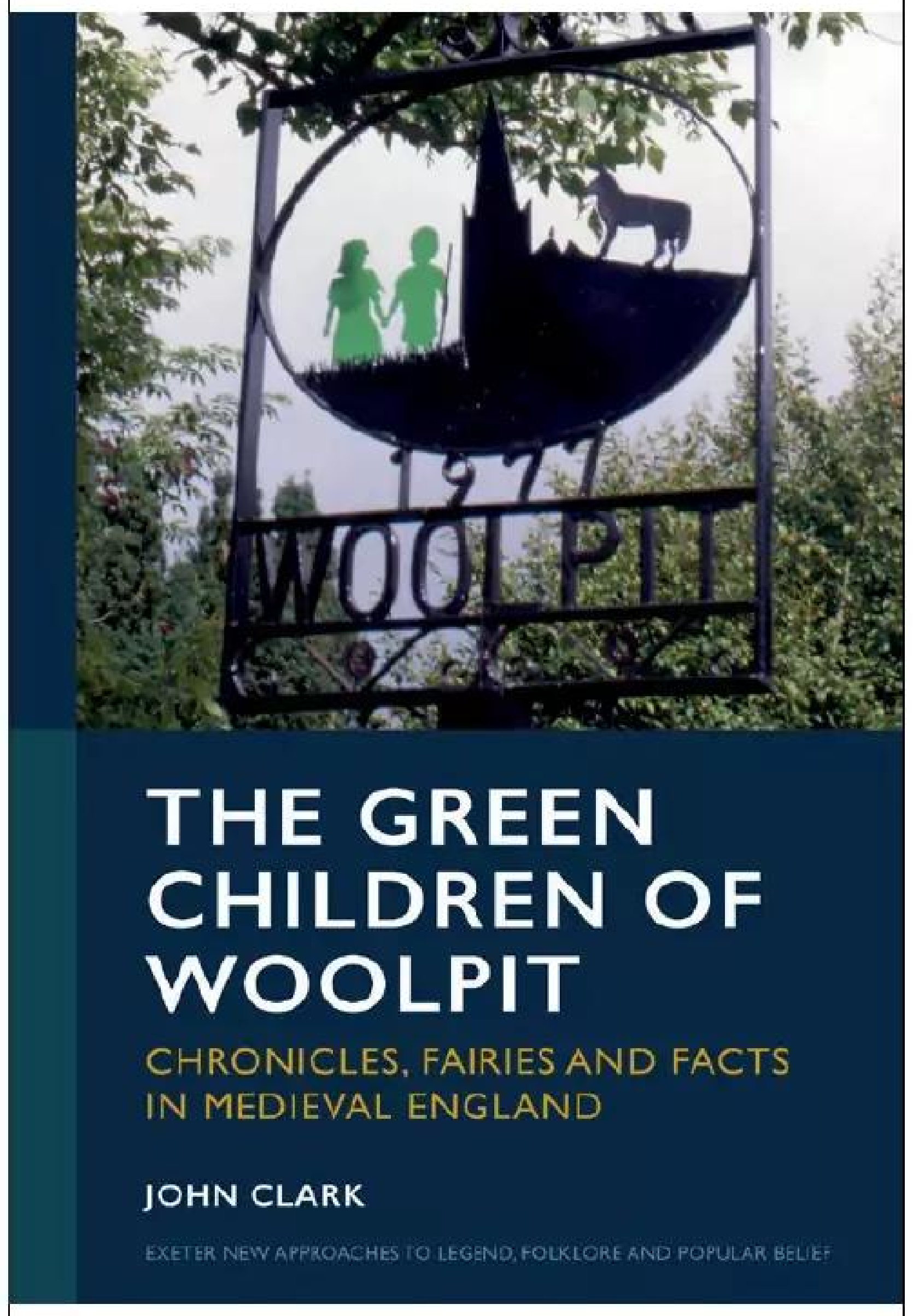
The arrival of the Woolpit waifs stirred several authors, perhaps most notably Kevin Crossley-Holland, to give voice to the children and retell or reimagine their story, with the fabled incident also leading to a comic strip in the 1980 *Misty Holiday Special*, as well as almost bringing about two separate operas by Peter Maxwell Davies and Benjamin Britten that in the end never quite came to fruition.

Additionally, the story gave rise to a high-profile hoax, the so-called "Green Children of Banjos", an 1887 sensation said to have occurred in a non-existent Spanish village; this event inspired the song "Green Children" by the band 10,000 Maniacs, though it stems from a bogus translocation of the Suffolk prototype to Spain in John Macklin's 1965 pulp paperback *Strange Destinies*.

Originally, however, the tale of the children was set down in two separate, near-contemporary Latin accounts: one, by William of Newburgh, an Augustinian canon at a Yorkshire priory, was included in his *Historia Rerum Anglicarum* (*The History of English Affairs*) around 1198; while the other appears in a chapter in the *Chronicon Anglicanum* (*English Chronicle*) penned by Ralph of Coggeshall, abbot of a small Cistercian house in Essex. The latter, although not finished until the 1220s, was written decades earlier, possibly in the 1190s.

Clark compares both of these accounts line by line, analysing the intriguing differences. For example, the eyewitness Sir Richard de Calne, an acquaintance of Ralph's, features only in his version of events – in which, for unknown reasons, the siblings are taken by the villagers to Sir Richard's manor, Wykes, some miles distant.

Later, Ralph goes on to tell us what happened to the surviving green-skinned girl, who by that point had acquired a more usual ruddy complexion, a consequence of embracing regular fare (and not just eating beans). She stayed for many years in the service of the knight, though apparently "remained very wanton and impudent", a detail Clark explains Ralph may well include to signify and support his interpretation of the children's Otherworld origins. Contrastingly, in William's narrative, the girl grows up to become "not in the least different from the women of our kind". Indeed, rather mundanely, she is said to have married a man from King's Lynn in neighbouring Norfolk.


WOOLPIT
THE GREEN CHILDREN OF WOOLPIT
CHRONICLES, FAIRIES AND FACTS IN MEDIEVAL ENGLAND
JOHN CLARK
EXETER NEW APPROACHES TO LEGEND, FOLKLORE AND POPULAR BELIEF

Probably wisely, Clark does not go at length into the various extraterrestrial origin theories that have more recently been taken on by some as a way of explaining the strange events. He does, though, make several fascinating investigative sidesteps into obscure medical conditions (chiefly chlorosis and favism) that could provide rational explanations for the story's most intriguing aspect: that leek-green skin.

The bulk of the book, however, concentrates on the accounts themselves and their historical and folkloric context, as well as exploring possible interpretations and the rich afterlife the story took on. Interestingly, there is no evidence that the tale survived locally in oral or written tradition much beyond the two chroniclers' accounts – the Victorian folklorist Thomas Keightley seems to have re-popularised the story when he included a translation of Ralph's account in the second edition of his 1850 *Fairy Mythology*.

Today, though, the tale is once more embraced by the modern-day Suffolk locals who live close to where the children appeared: their green silhouettes adorn the Woolpit village sign, a photo of which features on the cover of this book.

The Green Children of Woolpit is a comprehensive, meticulously referenced and fascinating delve into this most-beguiling of stories, for which John Clark should be highly commended. Crucially, it's also very readable.

Are there any negative issues? Only one – the high cover price that's a characteristic of specialist academic press books. [See biblio detail above – Ed.] Hopefully at some point a more affordable paperback might be brought out that can bring Clark's painstaking years of research to the wide audience it deserves.

★★★★★

Wonders in the Deep

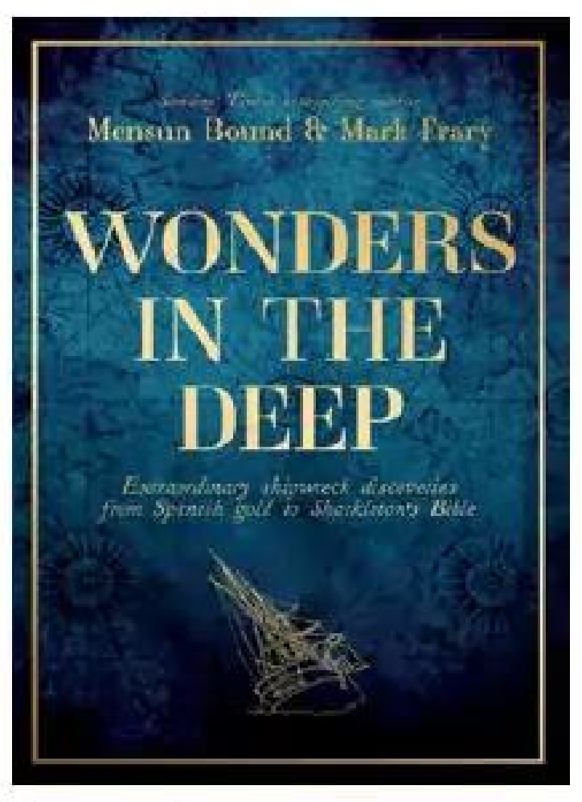
Extraordinary Shipwreck Discoveries from Spanish Gold to Shackleton's Bible

Mensun Bound & Mark Frary

Simon & Schuster 2024

Hb, 401pp, £30, ISBN 9781398507401

As it says in the introduction, "the millions of vessels that lie under the sea tell the human history of the world, and it is a story that marine archæologists and ocean explorers are all the time progressing". This elegant book, liberally illustrated, ranges from 3000 BC to the naval combatants of World War II and the Russian submarine *Kursk*, lost in 2000.



Underwater archæologist Mensun Bound is a fifth-generation Falkland Islander, and has directed some of the many shipwreck surveys described, including a sixth-century BC Etruscan vessel, an Elizabethan ship full of military supplies in the English Channel, the German flagship *Scharnhorst*, Ernest Shackleton's ship *Endurance*, and a 15th-century Vietnamese wreck found in the South China Sea in the 1990s, which takes its name – *Hoi An* – from the trading port nearby. It was the deepest hands-on excavation ever conducted, and yielded over 280,000 intact examples of Vietnamese ceramic pottery, the most interesting now in Vietnamese museums, while 90 per cent was sold at auction in the US in 2000.

There's a certain romance in objects rescued from the seabed – and I am delighted to own two blue-and-white scholar's pen-holders from this cargo.

Some things are recovered and then vanish again, like the sixth-century BC Corinthian Greek helmet, the finest ever found, recovered from a wreck off Italy in 1962 and subsequently lost sight of.

Objects brought up from the seabed include skeletons and sewing pins, cannon balls and peacocks, but the accounts of how the wrecks were found are often the most interesting passages in the book, often told first-hand by Bound.

Paul Sieveking

★★★

FORTEAN FICTION: DEAD INKLING

MATT BARTON TALKS TO NATHAN CONNOLLY OF DEAD INK BOOKS ABOUT THE ENDURING APPEAL OF THE UNCANNY

Dead Ink is both an independent Liverpool bookshop and a publisher that looks beyond the mainstream for its strange and uncanny offerings...

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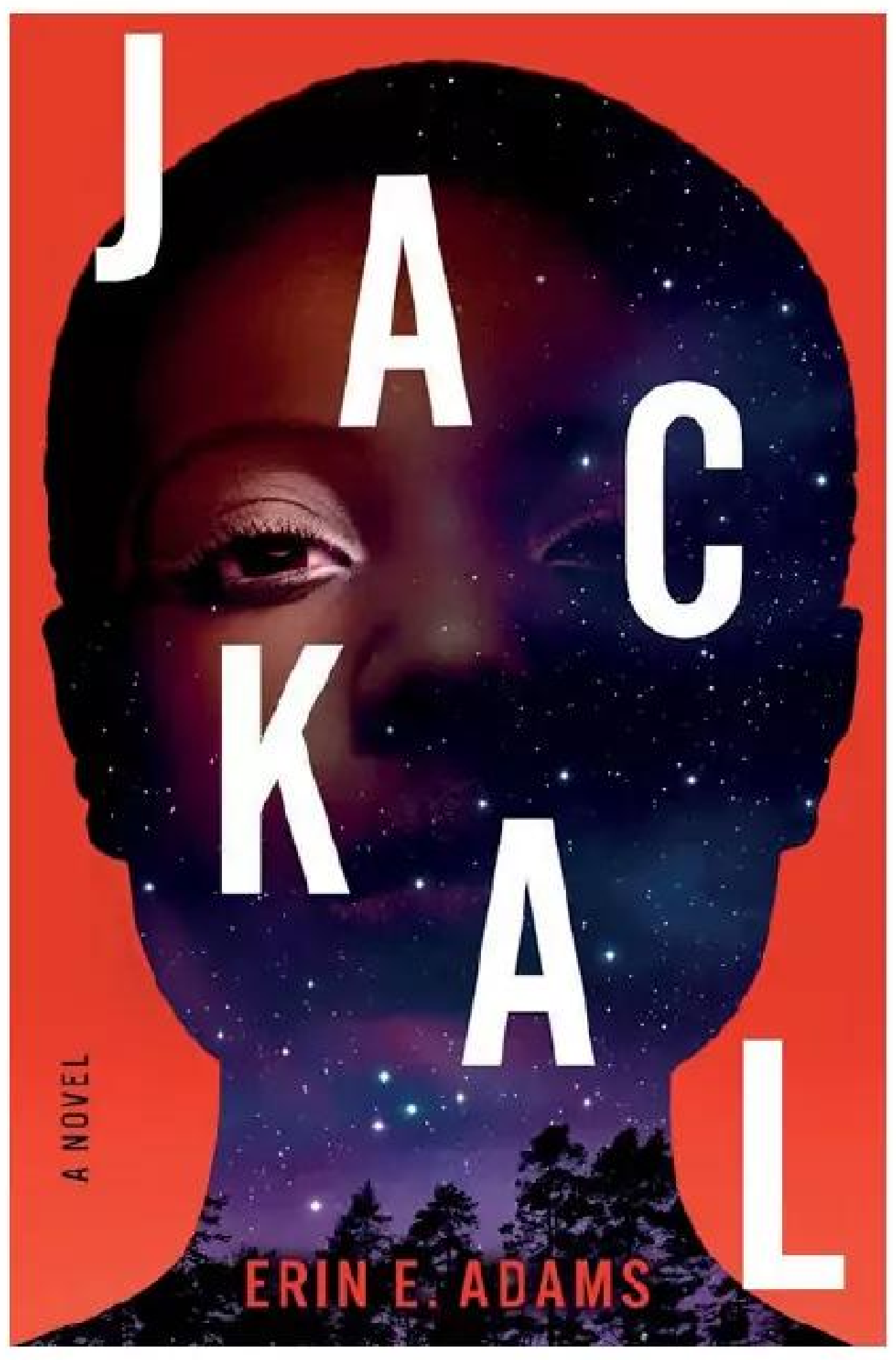


"I grew up reading *Goosebumps*, and watching *Eerie Indiana*," says Nathan Connolly, managing director of Dead Ink books. Dead Ink recently published *Lost in the Garden*, by Adam S Leslie; a hauntological novel described by FT's Bob Fischer in his 'Haunted Generation' column as "a nightmarish amble through tangled country lanes, with a melting Fab lolly dripping down your sleeve." Since Dead Ink was established in 2011, many of their titles have contained themes of interest to readers of *Fortean Times*; including the original version of recently filmed folk-horror *Starve Acre* by Andrew Michael Hurley (see **FT449:38-43**).

"I always found something comforting in the horror genre," Nathan tells me. "Horror is no longer the weird cousin confined to the back of the bookshop. Readers are now largely genre-agnostic."

It's a wet Wednesday afternoon and I've taken shelter in the Dead Ink bookshop on Smithdown Road, Liverpool. Nathan picks out a selection of fortean-friendly titles from their back-catalogue for me to look over. One of these is *London Incognito*, a collection of psychogeographical horror stories by Gary Budden. Budden's book finds the uncanny in the familiar; these are the very real mean streets of the capital, but his protagonists encounter ghosts and goddesses in the isolated, liminal spaces of the city.

The longest story in *London Incognito* is the Shirley Jackson Award-nominated "Judderman". Set in the 1970s, it tells the tale of Danny and Gary Eider, two brothers obsessed with urban folklore in a rapidly modernising world. Their search for a malevolent spirit finds them knee-deep in muddy wastelands alongside the Thames, where they meet a cast of like-minded weirdoes in search of a shadow-London that is always slightly out of reach. As I look through the selection of books that Nathan selects, confusingly I see one that also has the title *Judderman*; a pocket-sized paperback credited not to Gary Budden, but to a DA Northwood. The same story as the one in *London Incognito*, Judderman is part of a series from a Dead-Ink imprint called the Eden Book Society.

"A long-running issue I have is that I get bored with the publishing world and its conventionality," Nathan tells me. "At one point, that boredom ended up leading to the Eden Book Society. I decided we were going to publish six novellas from leading horror writers, but we weren't going to tell anyone who wrote them, and we told everyone that they were lost classics from the 1970s. There was a whole worldbuilding lore to go with them. We even had the likes of Nina Allen and Ramsey Campbell writing articles about how they used to come across Eden titles in the past."

It was under the Eden Book Society imprint that the original version of *Starve Acre* by Andrew Michael Hurley was published. Hurley's protagonist in *Starve Acre* is a grieving archæologist who encounters the superstitions of an isolated rural community.

"I reached out to Andrew, and it turns out he was excited about the idea," Nathan says. "We had quite a few fun discussions about *Starve Acre* as it developed, and it was obviously incredible, so it inevitably caught the eye of [Publisher] John Murray. We ended up selling it so they could publish it under Andrew's name, which is why you can no longer buy the Eden edition."

Plunge Hill by JM McVulpin (another Eden pen-name) is a gothic horror set in the north west of England during the power cuts of the 1970s; the new typist at Plunge Hill hospital slowly uncovers the bloody secrets of the nearby village in a story ingeniously told through documents collected as part of an official enquiry. If you're impressed by the unsettling techniques used in *Plunge Hill*, and maybe want to write a horror novel yourself, you could do worse than pick up a copy of Dead Ink's *Writing the Uncanny: Essays on Crafting Strange Fiction*. This includes the Gary Budden essay "Half-Concealed Places, or A Particularly Humdrum Uncanny" and an enlightening essay on the writing of Robert Aickman by none other than Jeremy Dyson.

Although the scope of Dead Ink's output is broad, Nathan tells me that they have plans to continue to publish books that will tickle the fancy of lovers of the uncanny. "*Jackal* by Erin E Adams came out in October and is quite clearly going to be a very big hit. Then there's *Mystery Lights* by Lena Valencia, which is just an astounding collection of uncanny and weird tales. We've also recently signed a two-book deal with Vanessa Santos for her debut collection and debut novel. Keep it to yourselves, but I think she's going to be sort of a big deal."

Find out more at: https://deadinkbooks.com/

Matt Barton is a writer, tour-guide and musician from Liverpool.

The not-so-magnificent seven

Guy Maddin serves up political satire with supernatural trimmings, but it doesn't quite come off

Rumours

Dir Guy Maddin, Galen Johnson, Evan Johnson, Canada 2024
On general release from 6 Dec

An ever-relevant genre across multiple media, political satire has been working overtime in recent years, so perhaps it is unsurprising that Guy Maddin has joined forces with frequent collaborators Evan and Galen Johnson once more to tell the tale of a G7 summit gone terribly awry.

Here, we are introduced to fictionalised versions of a septet of leaders from Germany, Canada, France, Italy, Japan, the UK and the USA. After the obligatory posing for group photos, the leaders withdraw to the woods to compose a joint statement on the latest global crisis; but when their wine glasses need refilling and the waiting staff are suddenly nowhere to be found, it slowly begins to dawn on the group that they are woefully ill equipped to deal with a more immediate threat: lost in the forest, they are faced with challenges (zombie bog bodies, a giant brain) that cannot be staved off with longwinded empty promises, but instead require them to act – something they are profoundly incapable of.

> *These challenges cannot be staved off with empy promises*

Cate Blanchett leads the cast as the German Chancellor alongside the overly emotional Canadian Prime Minister of Roy Dupuis, with the rest of the cast representing stereotypes of the other nations involved and the people who lead them. Charles Dance's portrayal of an ageing POTUS amuses, not least due to Dance using his natural British accent while portraying an overly patriotic American leader in dire need of retirement. Similarly funny, Rolando Ravello approaches the incompetence of the Prime Minister of Italy with a childlike confusion, which works particularly well in his interplay with Denis Ménochet's President of France, the latter possessing plenty of panache but lacking any substance.

Considering the current climate, both politically and environmentally, the premise is a doozy, and while the players involved are clearly game for the challenge, *Rumours* ultimately fails to stick the landing. There are shades of Iannucci in how the leaders' ineptitude and dubious charisma is portrayed, and in how this is emphasised by elements such as the performativity of them dining in an impractically scenic area as they struggle to draft their statement with anything other than the usual hollow claptrap and banal waffle. But the delivery never quite manages to elevate the piece to adequately farcical levels. This is further exacerbated by how the more preposterous, supernatural elements are introduced without being used to their full potential, both in terms of their immediate shock value and the allegorical commentary they are presumably supposed to provide.

Much as the G7 leaders become lost in the woods, *Rumours* also meanders aimlessly for significant stretches of time, and since the commentary is often a little too on the nose, the lack of narrative urgency detracts from the film's impact as a whole, meaning the satirical value is lost. This is not to say that the film should be avoided, and seeing as this is Maddin's most mainstream film so far, it may be a good entry point into the Canadian's fascinating filmography for newcomers; but, as with his other works, your mileage may vary as far as how engaging you find the piece.

Leyla Mikkelsen

★★☆☆☆

Oddity

Dir Damian McCarthy, Ireland 2024
Streaming on Shudder

Oddity is a new Irish horror film written and directed by Damian McCarthy, shot, like his previous horror feature, *Caveat*, in County Cork.

Alone one night, Dani Odello-Timmis is murdered, apparently by a patient, Olin Boole, who was recently released from the hospital where her psychiatrist husband, Ted Timmis, works. We see Boole trying to get Dani to open the door of the old coach house she is restoring, and more of what happened that night is revealed in flashbacks as the narrative unfolds.

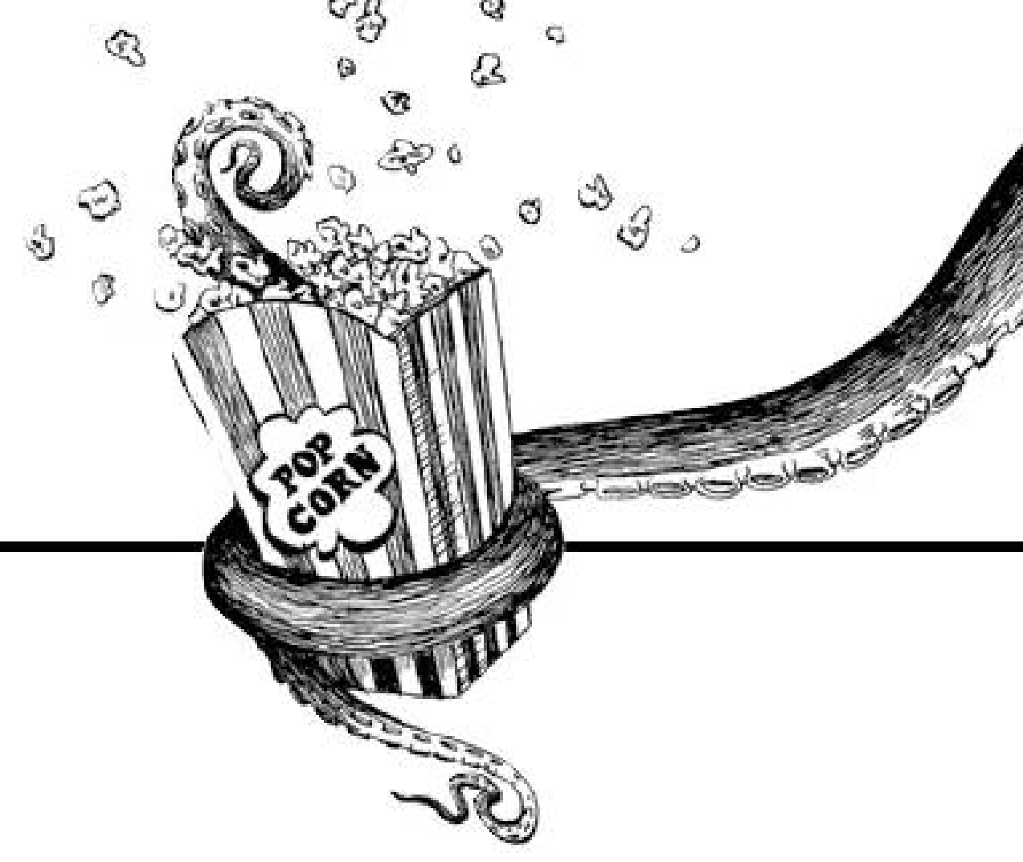
A year on, Dani's twin sister Darcy is still grieving over the loss. Dani is a blind psychic who runs a curio shop and claims most of the objects in it are haunted. When Boole is found murdered in the hospital, Dr Timmis retrieves his glass eye and brings it to Dani. She picks up memories from it and states that Boole wasn't the murderer.

This is a film full of plot twists and secrets involving hauntings, possessed objects, sinister motives, a Golem of sorts, possible necromancy and even a soupcon of cannibalism. The grim hospital and dark coach house provide vivid settings for the horror to unfold in, and a haunted hotel bell ring, complete with a bell boy ghost, is central to the storyline.

Jump-scares along with scenes of horror and gore permeate *Oddity*, but it's the sense of gradually building dread and existential terror which predominate and make this a clever addition to the Irish canon of ghostly horror stories. There are impressive performances from Carolyn Bracken as Dani and Darcy, Gwilym Lee as Dr Timmis, Tadhg Murphy as Boole and Steve Wall as the strange hospital attendant Ivan.

Páiric Ó Corráin

★★★★☆



TELEVISION

FT's resident couch potatoes, **STU NEVILLE & RUTH MORRIS** cast an eye over the small screen's current fortean offerings

Amid a fanfare of publicity, Amazon Prime promises us an exclusive peek into the unique relationship between the royal family and the unexplained in *The King of UFOs*. Narrated by Howard Hughes, presumably not the dead one with tissue boxes on his feet, and produced by fortean musician Mark Christopher Lee, presumably not a descendant of Lord Summerisle. With such prestigious names, you would expect great things but what follows aspires to be *Fortean TV* upholstered by the creators of *Twin Peaks*.

Cue Summerisle repeatedly walking in and out of his front door in the manner of a man who forgot to get some milk, followed by Richard Felix (not literally), revealing that most castles are (shock, horror) haunted. For a start, King George VI saw Elizabeth I eight times in the library (no mention of whether lead piping was involved).

The royal family goes back hundreds of years, Mark tells us, helpfully listing some of them in case we weren't sure. If this was a game of royal poker, he would be scoring high. Enter demonologist Ian Broadmore, who, not to be outdone, describes a game of spiritualistic Blind Man's Buff in which Lilian Bayliss achieved a Royal Flush at a fantasy league royal séance.

Back on the material plane, we meet investigator John Hanson, who has taken his UFO pursuit to such extremes that he now bears an uncanny resemblance to Ed Straker. Hanson tells us that Lord Mountbatten was apparently fascinated by UFOs, particularly after an alleged sighting on his own estate, where nocturnal bricklayer Fred Briggs saw a saucer descend in the dead of night. Mountbatten didn't see this himself, despite the frequent implication that he did, but Mark and the inevitable rent-a-gob Nick Pope don't let this fact trouble them, which is symptomatic of the programme as a whole.

> *The royal family goes back hundreds of years, Mark tells us helpfully*

We move onto 'Prince Charles pilots a prototype UFO'. Primary witness is a former child diver, inexplicably dressed as an Ice-T impersonator. What follows is his account of how he witnessed Prince Charles fly a craft that looked like a circular helicopter by day but a flying saucer by night. This silent chopper had a blue laser that 'liquidised' trees into dust (huh?) to create a path through the forest, any evidence of which was bulldozed away by first light (yes, the liquidised dust was bulldozed).

And so it goes on, with Rendlesham and Prince Albert's orbs, throwing out story after story presented as fact, with migraine-inducing graphics and frequent B-movie sequences that do nothing but irritate. This promised to be a rollercoaster ride of ufological and paranormal delights. If by a rollercoaster they meant a programme that gives you motion sickness and an ultimately empty feeling, then a rollercoaster it is.

THE REVEREND'S REVIEW

FT's resident man of the cloth **REVEREND PETER LAWS** dons his dog collar and faces the flicks that Church forgot!

Movies are rarely original; they're translations – new interpretations of stories, ideas or riffs on other works. In the delicate art of adaptation, the original's spirit can either thrive or get lost in translation.

Take 1989's *Tomie* (Blu-ray, Arrow Video). It sounds so promising. It's based on Junji Ito's intense horror manga, and anything from this legendary artist usually guarantees a bona fide frightfest. The concept is compelling, too: over decades, police keep finding what appears to be the same murdered girl, with the same name, over and over again. Yet *Tomie* on film fails (or doesn't even try) to capture the sheer, hair-raising terror of Ito's pages. The pacing? Glacial. The horror imagery? Watered down. By the halfway mark, my mind had wandered into drafting this review (always a bad sign). I even considered the line: "You've tried *The Ring*, now try BOR-RING." Yet *Tomie* creeps up on you. I even felt a few shivers in the last 10 minutes – well, very slight ones. It's worth a watch, but for me this was less nightmare fuel than nap fuel.

Like *Tomie*, *Apartment 7A* (digital platforms) has an impressive pedigree: it's a prequel to Roman Polanski's benchmark 1968 horror *Rosemary's Baby*. This one expands on a lesser character from the original movie, Terry Gionoffrio. We see the young dancer being targeted by a Satanic New York cult before they turn their sights on Rosemary. The Terry connection is nifty and intriguing, but it leads to predictability. We know Terry's fate, for a start. It also checks off the beats from the original, but without any unexpected jolts. Polanski's work still carries a shocking quality, yet this feels 'safe'. Julia Garner is, admittedly, excellent as Terry. Yet the scariest moments aren't even supernatural – it's watching Garner teeter on stage, poised to snap an ankle. I covered my eyes for that. It's worth a shot, and do look out for the mid-credits sequence, but watching *Apartment 7A* is like hearing a cover band play your favourite song – it's familiar, and you tap your feet, but it just makes you miss the original even more.

> *For me, this was less nightmare fuel than nap fuel*

While comparisons are inevitable, the creators of *Critters* (1986) insist their script predated Gremlins (1984); rewrites were even done to distance it. Thankfully, the *Critters* franchise carves its own niche when tiny, toothy aliens (Krites) escape from an asteroid prison and crash-land on Earth. They're pursued by shape-shifting bounty hunters who can morph into any human they spot (whether it's a rock star with a mullet or a Playboy centerfold). The Krites might look like high-end sock puppets, but the blend of comic horror, quasi-gore, and dark humour is still fun. In this Blu-ray set Arrow Video serves up the first four films, which range from small-town mayhem to city chaos and outer space shenanigans. Before he was king of the world, Leonardo DiCaprio was just a kid with a frisbee, trying to survive space porcupines. *Critters 3* was his cinematic debut.

ForteanTimes

PRESENTS

POLTERGEIST!

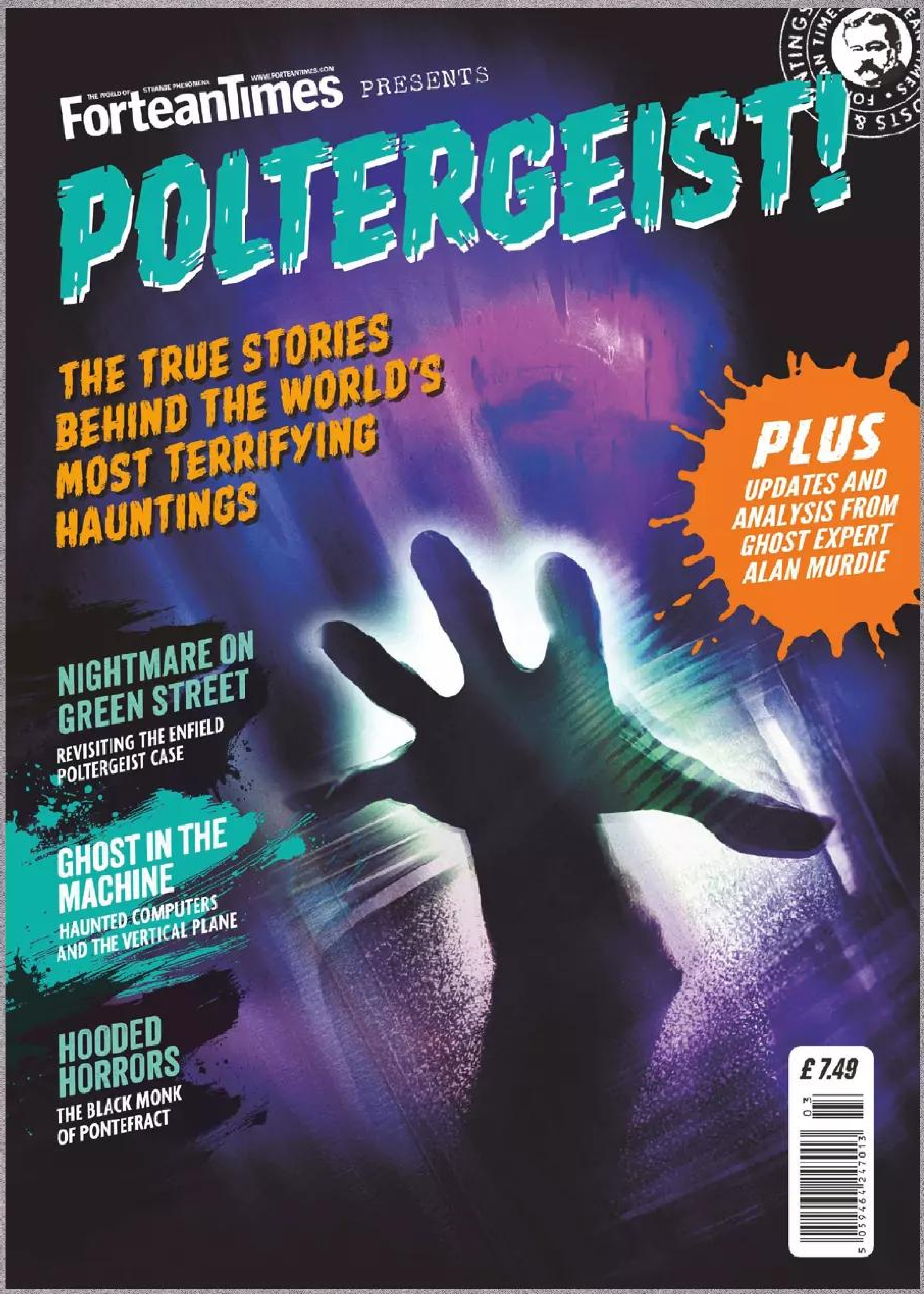
THE WORLD'S MOST TERRIFYING HAUNTINGS

From the archives of FORTEAN TIMES, the world's foremost journal of strange phenomena, comes a new collection exploring the terrifying world of poltergeists.

Providing perfect reading for Hallowe'en, this new special edition from Fortean Times brings together poltergeist cases past and present, focusing on the most terrifying, destructive and sometimes violent hauntings on record.

Join us for a detailed look at cases old and new, from the Enfield haunting - Britain's most famous poltergeist case - and the Black Monk of Pontefract - inspiration for Colin Wilson's study of the phenomenon - to lesser known outbreaks from across history and around the world.

Plus, our resident ghost expert Alan Murdie - himself an investigator of many a poltergeist case - provides updates, analysis and commentary on the articles, helping readers to delve deeper into the ongoing mystery of these 'noisy spirits.'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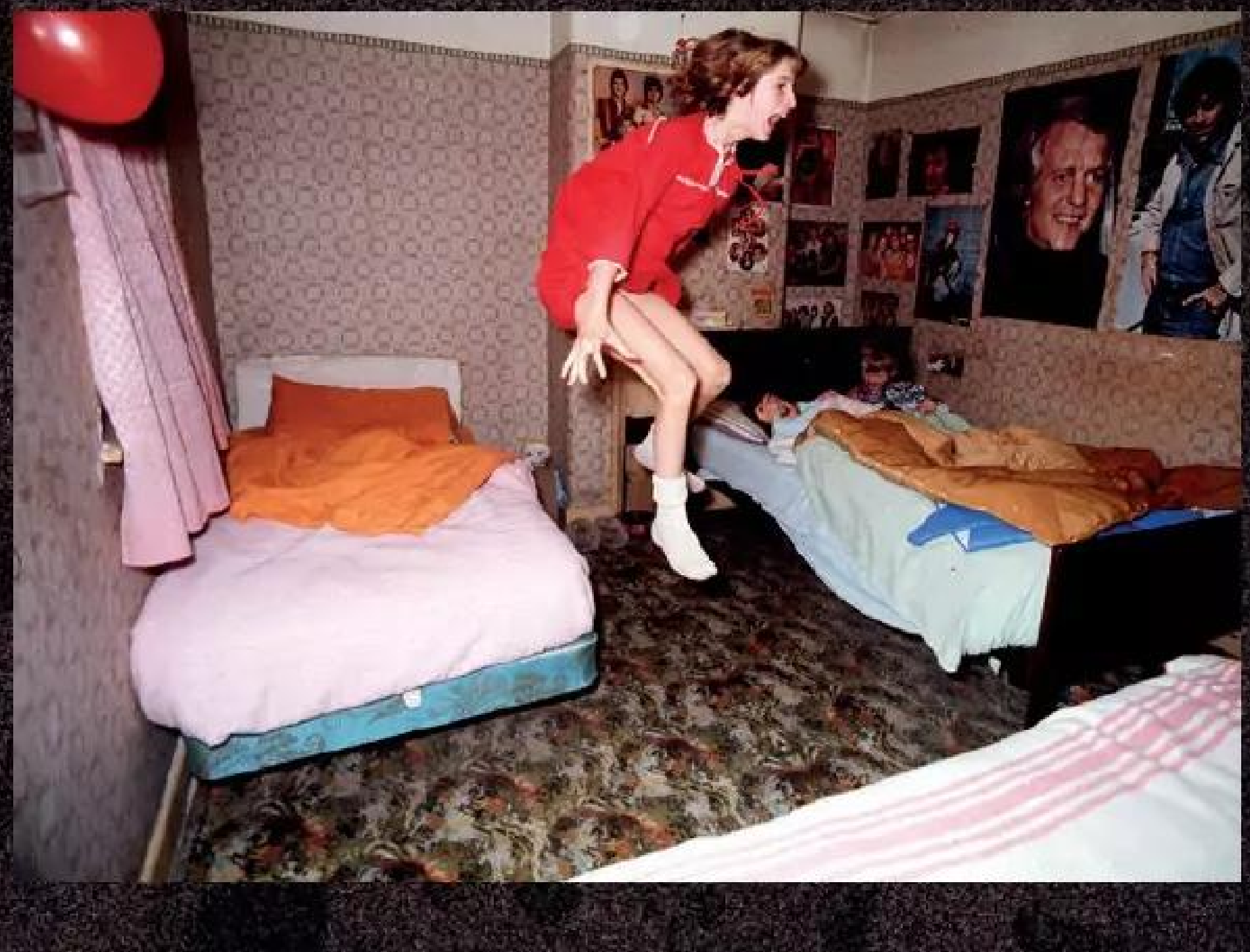

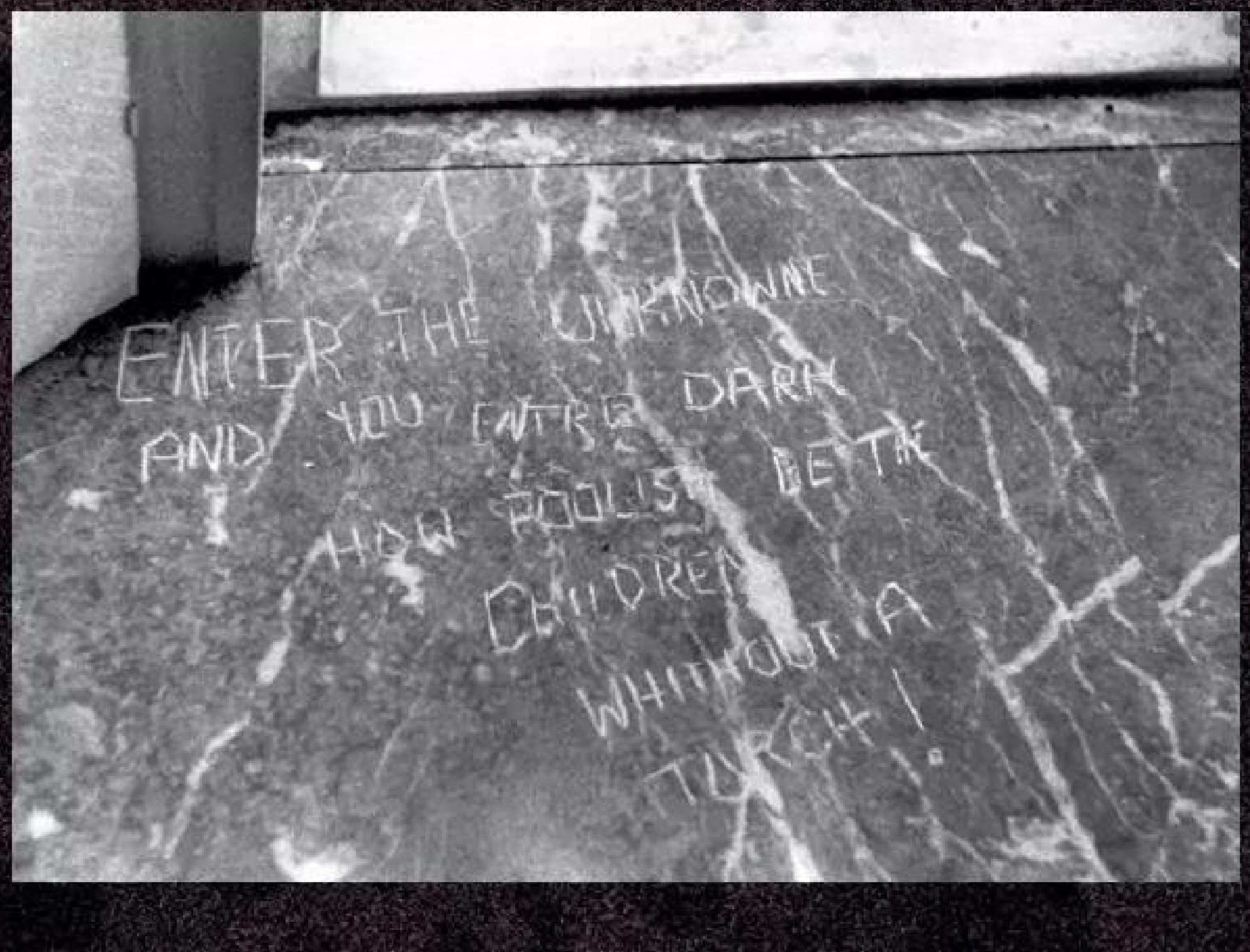
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Dealing with the Devil

Your review of the book *Devil's Contract* [**FT449:60**] brought to mind something that has always bothered me about the very idea of making a deal with Old Scratch. By pretty much any reading of the multiple versions of Christian theology, any such attempt is pointless. The simple act of going to Satan for a deal is a rejection of God and your soul is already forfeit so you will get nothing; nix, nada, nowt. Now I can understand why Satan herself (my only encounter was with her in female form, but that's a story for another time) might play the poor black-candle burning saps along for a while as she does like a good laugh. Imagine the demonic minions asking the Princess of Darkness to play the greatest hits – "Oh, oh, Boss! Do the old you-can-have-any-woman-you-desire routine, it's a cracker!"

Getting out stories that some people did indeed make a deal (yes, we're talking about you Faust) is reasonable as it would be good for drumming up further business, but the bottom line is she can promise you anything at all. You're not going to get it. Ever.

Perhaps our (not at all damned for all Eternity) readers have ideas about this, similar/opposite/tangential.

Brian McTaggart
Dundee, Scotland

DD Home

In his 'Ghostwatch' slot, Alan Murdie refers to Daniel Dunglas Home, a celebrated, but controversial, Scottish medium from the 19th century [**FT449:17**]. Murdie gives the span of Home's life as "1859-1883", which would suggest that he died around the age of 24. In fact, though, Home died of tuberculosis in 1886, at the age of 53, having been born in 1833, near Edinburgh.

Peter A McCue
East Dunbartonshire

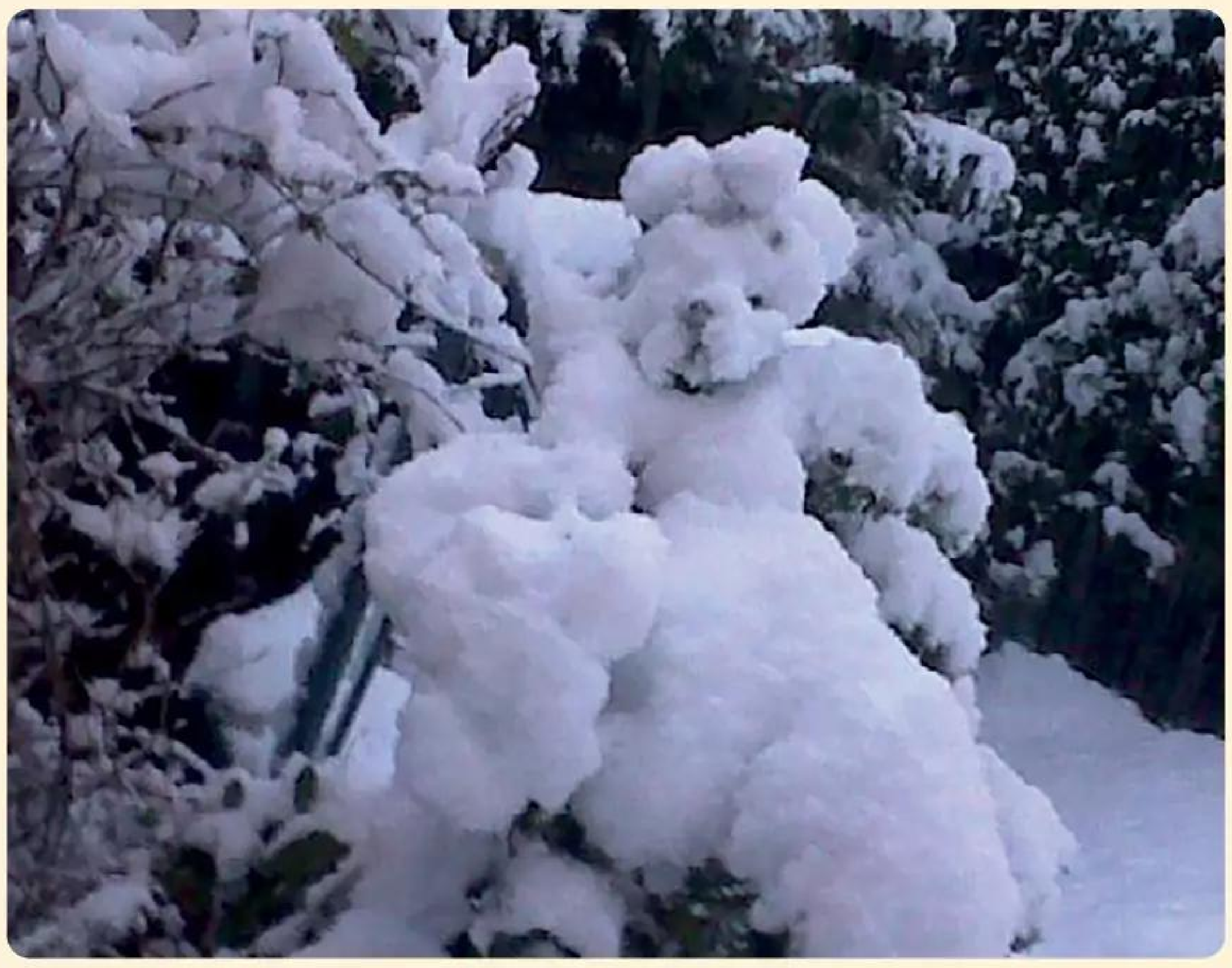
Memory cloud

SD's letter ("Memory Cloud", **FT446:60-61**) caused me to remember that I have read somewhere that some neurologists have said that they are starting to feel that consciousness may need more than a human brain in order to function. The next thing that came to mind was the idea of the 'hive mind' beloved of science fiction and apparently operating in ant nests and bee hives. When this topic arises, I also think of the ubiquitous presence of hand-held Internet devices; are they a form of electromagnetic hive mind?

Is it possible that the shared awareness is an application of the Many Worlds Interpretation (**FT446:11**)? The barrier between the Worlds may not be rigid.

Michael Holt
By email

SIMULACRA CORNER



Dean Wilkinson noticed this apparent teddy bear with a bow on its head in his garden in Ingleby Barwick, North Yorkshire.

We are always glad to receive pictures of spontaneous forms and figures, or any curious images. Send them (with your postal address) to Fortean Times, PO Box 1200, Whitstable CT1 9RH or to sieveking@forteantimes.com

Coco Chanel

With regard to Gaby Chanel being a "Nazi collaborator", I think this over-simplifies a highly complex situation in France during World War II. Personally, I don't regard dear Coco as pro-Nazi at all; I believe she was essentially working with the French Resistance to infiltrate the Nazis and extract information from SS officers in order to feed it back to the British Government. In short, she was a spy, but was basically on our side.

Obviously, she was heavily involved in the Parisian 'occult' scene, and could certainly be described as a 'witch' in modern parlance. The exact level of her involvement with Aleister Crowley is still rather obscure. In order to combat the occult side of Nazism, the Allies needed to mobilise our own occultists, for example Dion Fortune, to fight against the Nazis' so-called 'Black Camelot'.

In occupied France, the dilemma for Coco, in my view, was much more whether to favour Royalty or Republic. She was, I believe, of Merovingian descent, hence her sometime loyalty to the Languedoc-Roussillon region, the Merovingian heartland, and one-time friend Emma Calvé, the Languedocian opera singer. Coco did indeed spend some time at Rennes-le-Chateau!

Most of her biographies conveniently gloss over the 'occult' aspect of her life. Being a female Freemason was never easy, but she was always keen to establish as many Masonic Lodges for ladies as she could.

It's debatable whether or not she truly believed she was the incarnation of Isis. She established at least three ladies' lodges in Paris, but didn't quite succeed in founding a permanent female lodge here in Bath.

Sean ––
Bath, Somerset

Helpful credulity

In response to Peter A McCue's letter [**FT449:65**] in which he calls out David Barrett for his hubristic support of the APRU and their sceptical attitude to anomalous phenomena, I have to say that I wholeheartedly agree that such an approach is antagonistic towards that which they purport to study. It has now been shown many times that the paranormal only really flourishes in an atmosphere of credulity.

Steve Dempsey
London

Fortean TV Revisited

In answer to the question which Ryan Shirlow posed in his article on *Fortean TV* Revisited [**FT449:48**], I think that Lionel Fanthorpe's "The Extinct Animals Song" was sung to the tune of "Wild Colonial Boy", an Irish-Australian folk song.

Geoff Clifton
Solihull, West Midlands

Editor's note*: Thanks to John Sergeant, who made the same point.*

The Tree of Life

A nice shelf of long-lost library books [**FT449:8-9**]. It reminded me of a similar case: the return of Charles Darwin"s "Tree of Life" notebooks, which contain many of his earliest notes on natural selection. These two books went missing from Cambridge University library many years ago, but it was only recently acknowledged as a theft, and when the library put out a public appeal, the books were anonymously returned. They were left outside the librarian's office, in a gift bag

LETTERS

Fortean programme

After reading the articles on Lionel Fanthorpe's *Fortean TV* programmes [**FT448/449**], I was reminded of a distant precursor to this series by the name of "The Day it Rained Periwinkles". If memory serves, it was a one-off show, courtesy of BBC2's *Man Alive* and was screened during the early Seventies. I can only recall one segment of the programme in which a British family recounted an incident involving the appearance of ball lightning in a corner of their living room, during a particularly violent thunderstorm. Can any reader help to flesh out my somewhat patchy recollections?

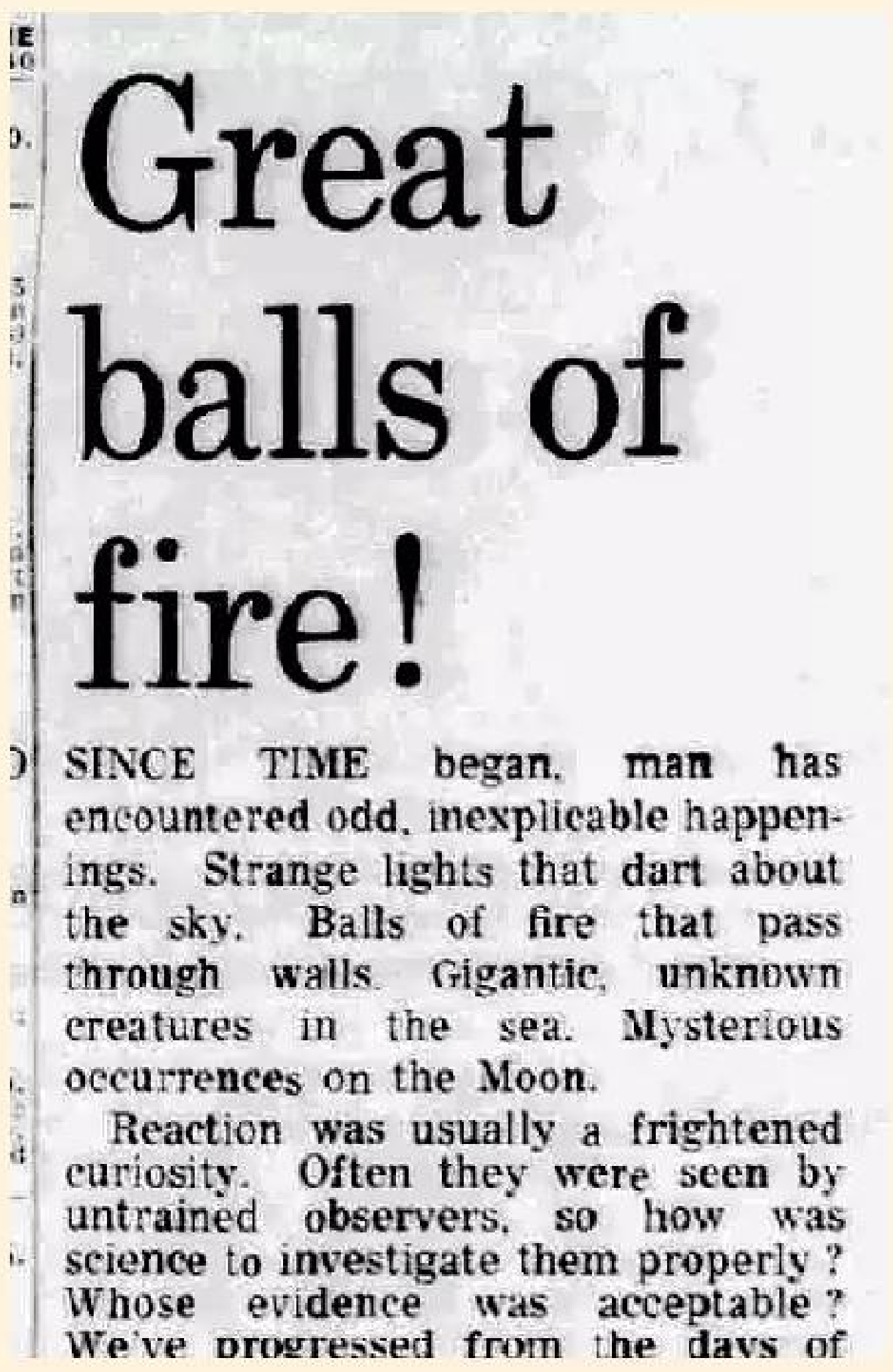
Steve Pescott
Emsworth, Hampshire

FT founder Bob Rickard replies:

I certainly remember the BBC programme "The Day it Rained Periwinkles", which was broadcast on 7 February 1972 on the Beeb's flagship science programme Horizon *(not* Man Alive*; see https://tinyurl.com/j64px7jp).*

I was 27, fresh out of art college, generally unemployed and already well into collecting fortean news clippings. This was the period in which I was debating with fortean pals – such as Paul Devereux, Paul Screeton and the late Paul Willis and Steve Moore – the move to publish them in a cut-and-paste type newsletter format. I was a big fan of the BBC2 show – the only one of the UK's three TV stations at that time broadcasting science-based programmes. That evening, I was astonished to see, in this pioneering presentation of fortean stories, how such material could be presented in a serious way to a British audience.

The blurb in that week's Radio Times *declared: "Balls of fire that pass through walls, torrents of periwinkles, gigantic unknown sea creatures, mysterious glowing lights in the night sky. There has never been a time when men did not report seeing strange things. The reaction was usually a mixture of curiosity and fear. But how can science study these rare, improbable occurrences that are short-lived and usually witnessed by untrained, highly susceptible observers? In the 18th century the French Academy of Sciences refused to believe in the existence of meteorites. Might we not be making the same mistake with sea monsters and unidentified flying objects? Certainly, they pose present-day scientists with a dilemma. They raise such questions as what is acceptable evidence? What is an experiment? Tonight* Horizon *looks at some of these phenomena that have baffled and irritated scientists for centuries, and considers how science can deal with them."*



Great balls of fire!

SINCE TIME began, man has encountered odd, inexplicable happenings. Strange lights that dart about the sky. Balls of fire that pass through walls. Gigantic, unknown creatures in the sea. Mysterious occurrences on the Moon.

Reaction was usually a frightened curiosity. Often they were seen by untrained observers, so how was science to investigate them properly? Whose evidence was acceptable? We've progressed from the days of

I cannot now remember whether Charles Fort or any other of his cases were also mentioned in that episode of Horizon*… but there it was! One of Fort's most memorable reports headlining on UK TV. The allusion to a fall of "periwinkles" might have merely stimulated mild curiosity among the regular BBC viewers, but I recognised it immediately and thrilled at such a public account of the story Fort lampooned as 'The Mad Fishmonger' who so enthusiastically decorated the streets of Worcester with shellfish on 28 May 1881, as though the showers of periwinkles could not possibly have come down with a regular rain… or could they?*

Bob Rickard
London

with the label "*Dear Librarian, Happy Easter, X.*" So, it remains an unsolved mystery – who stole these unique artefacts, and kept them for decades, then gave them back in perfect condition? There are plenty of peculiar details that I'm sure *FT* readers would enjoy, if they feel inclined to read up on the case. Perhaps one of us can even get to the bottom of it.

Tim Wilkinson Lewis
Cambridge

Bovine Relocation

It was the first half of Aaron Bailey's letter *Bovines and Boiler Suits* [**FT443:64**] that got me thinking about bovine relocations. Mr Bailey mentioned the herd of cows which were allegedly relocated during the Broad Haven Triangle flap in 1974; and then the herd of cows apparently relocated prior to Alan Godfrey's famous close encounter in Todmorden in 1980. This brought to mind a similar happening, originally mentioned in Janet and Colin Bord's book *Modern Mysteries of Britain* (Grafton Books, 1987, page 143). The original source was named as *Sunday Express*, 5 Feb 1984, and it may also have been covered in *FT*.

The authors recount how, one morning in January 1984, Mr Derek Steedman, who ran a farm at Chillerton on the Isle of Wight, unlocked his barn to check on his herd of 12 Hereford calves, and was amazed to find not 12 but 13 animals, the interloper being a small white bull calf, identified as a Charolais crossbreed, and no more than a fortnight old.

The book stated how: "The night before, Mr Steedman had checked the calves and locked the shed door, so how did the white calf get inside, and where had it come from? It had no ear tags or markings to identify it, and despite much publicity no-one came forward to claim it."

Mr Steedman replied to the authors in a letter dated 17 November 1984, stating: "The sudden appearance of the calf remains a mystery, despite repeated attempts to ascertain its origin. It has now taken its place as the only white beast amongst the rest of the herd on my farm."

An online search revealed that Mr Derek Steedman passed away a few years ago, and I could find no way to contact his family.

However, I recently contacted editors of various publications on the Isle of Wight asking if they would run media appeals on my behalf, to try and discover if the mystery was ever solved.

At least two editors kindly agreed to help me including Jill Webster, editor of the online newsletter *Chillerton and Gatcombe News*, and Lori Little, co-editor of the *Isle of Wight County Press*. In addition, Ms Little also scanned the original article from her newspaper about the mystery, which the *Sunday Express* must have later picked upon.

The article entitled 'How Bullock Got on Farm is a Mystery,' stated that the animals were in a 'loose box', rather than a barn, which appears to be smaller than a barn, but still with enough room for the animals to move around in. It stated that Mr Steedman, who ran West Billingham Farm, had called in the police who were investigating.

"No-one has reported it stolen to the police," he said. "It is a real mystery. I have made enquiries all around. but I cannot find out who it belongs to". The article stated that the bullock was worth about £70 and if it was not claimed within a month, he was allowed to keep it – which he duly did!

At the time of writing this, I have received one reply to my media appeal, dated 13 April 2024 from Mr Roger White, who emailed me: "My wife Linda is Derek Steedman's daughter and we have just seen your letter in our local paper. We did speak to somebody a couple of years ago about this, but unfortunately can't add much to the story. We never got to the bottom of it. Derek assumed that it was one of his farming friends playing a practical joke, but nobody ever owned up to it."

An online search for breeders of Charolais bullocks revealed that there are several breeders around Britain, and one specifically on the Isle of Wight. I filled out an online form on their website for enquirers asking if they had a calf go missing (or stolen) around January 1984, but they did not reply. Make of that what you will.

I have not been able to discover whether the loose box was locked, and Mr White declined to reply to this and other questions in my follow-up email.

If the door was locked, and if Mr

Steedman had the only key, and if there was no other obvious way to get into the loose box, then this would elevate the mystery from a mere oddity to something truly bizarre, and it is disappointing that I did not get confirmation about whether it was locked or not.

However, locked or unlocked, the loose box was certainly closed as illustrated by the quote by Mr Steedman: "It [the calf] could not have opened the door on its own." Unless any *FT* readers know any better, the mystery remains unsolved.

Acknowledgements: many thanks to Lori Little, Jill Webster and Roger White.

Andy Owens
Halifax, West Yorkshire

Phantom monk

The following series of strange events have unfolded over many years, but until now I have never had the opportunity to document them. Some of them have occurred, almost literally, on my doorstep, and involved someone I have known since my youth, whose integrity I respect. Indeed, it was while staying with Lynne Hickey and her then partner in Deal, Kent, back in the early Seventies that I had my first ghostly experience. Lynne and Stuart were living in a flat situated below a ladies' hair salon, where they were both well-used to an invisible presence in the place; with occasional unaccountable footsteps, chills and the sense of something often brushing past them.

One night during our stay, my friend Ron and I, hunkered down in our sleeping bags on the living room floor, were disturbed by the distinct sound of light footsteps passing across the room above us and proceeding down an unseen staircase. When asking our hosts the following morning who was in occupation upstairs, we were told that the salon was certainly vacant at that hour, and that we had doubtless heard 'The White Lady', as they called their resident ghost. Furthermore, Stuart was no stranger to the supernatural, having witnessed his father's ghost many years before (see 'It happened to me' **FT412**, Dec 2021.)

In May 2001, Lynne had moved back to her home town of Portsmouth, Hampshire, and was living in Priory Crescent, Milton. Around this time, she began to experience occasional night-time visits by a tall, thin, cloaked figure with long hair, which appeared in her bedroom. However, it wasn't until eventually moving to Locksway Road (pictured above), a short distance away, in 2003, that these disturbing visits increased in intensity. On three occasions, at this time, Lynne experienced these frightening encounters – always in the early hours of the morning.

Lynne's account

"I was in bed and woke up, feeling a presence in front of me. In the far right-hand corner of the room stood an extremely tall figure. It was wearing a black cloak with a raised hood, which covered most of its face. Despite not seeing the features clearly, I felt this person was male. He was thin and held a staff in his left hand, and I felt he was going to walk towards me, but on this occasion did not move. I jumped out of bed and ran into my daughter's room, as I did not want to sleep alone. That was my first visit, but he would return.

"On a later occasion I woke up startled, as I felt a presence in the room. The same tall, slim man, again wearing a black cloak with a hood covering his face, was bent over beside the bed, just staring at me. I felt strangely calm and not at all scared this time. He then disappeared.

"The next visit, however, did scare me. Again, I was in the front bedroom asleep. I woke up very startled. The black-cloaked man had returned. He then walked over to me and I felt him sit down on the end of the bed. Whereupon I reached out to turn on the bedside lamp, but felt my arm strongly pulled back. I couldn't move as I was paralysed with fear. Eventually, I screamed and rushed to the main light switch on the wall. I was trembling, but by this time the figure had disappeared. Later I found out that Locksway Road, many years ago, was rumoured to be the site of a monastery.

"My boyfriend Dave, now my husband, also had lots of experiences in that front room. Sometimes he would feel extremely hot to the point of sweating, even though I was feeling cold! After that, he preferred to sleep in another bedroom, as he felt a distinct presence in my room. Eventually I sold the house and left the ghost behind. It would be interesting to know if the people living there now have had any experiences of this kind."

Lynne's suggestion that there was once a monastery in the vicinity of St James's Psychiatric Hospital, adjacent to Locksway Road, brought to mind a cutting I had sent to FT some years ago. This made reference to the possible existence of a priory in the area in times past, and also mentioned a ghostly, monk-like figure dressed in black.

After much rummaging in my 'files', I found a photocopy I had made of said cutting. It was an article from a local newsletter called 'Milton Matters', written by Ray Burrows and entitled "A Visitor in Black and 'The Priory'". It begins: "February 1996, I touched briefly on the subject of a priory in Milton. I was reminded of this one day when I was walking in the church garden of remembrance. A lady called out from the path, to say that she had recently moved into a house near Priory Crescent and wondered if there was any connection with a Priory or St James's Church. She said that the house was sometimes visited by a shadowy, ghostly figure, dressed in clerical black, who suddenly appeared and equally suddenly vanished. Fortunately, casting out ghosts was not in my terms of reference as a volunteered gardener!"

A strange dream

Sometime in the late Seventies or early Eighties, I had a very odd dream that contained features that might, perhaps, be relevant to Lynne's story. I dreamt I was in discussion with a group of people while walking around a small lake or pond. The lake had lilies on its surface, and the whole scene was bathed in bright sunlight. We were all dressed in white, ankle-length robes – or, dare I say, habits. I remember feeling blissfully happy until I knew I had to leave – which I desperately didn't want to do. Well, my mode of exit from this idyllic place was some kind of portal through the railings bordering the grounds of St James's Hospital. I can vividly remember passing through this gateway and landing on the pavement – now wearing normal clothing.

I was directly opposite the house in Locksway Road where Lynne would later take up residence. That morning I woke crying bitterly and have never forgotten this strange dream, which I interpreted at the time as something akin to an NDE (Near Death Experience), where people seem to have a glimpse of an afterlife. Whether this dream has any relevance to Lynne's visitor I have no idea, but it was very strange.

Furthermore, on a street map of the Milton area I had recently noticed a large pond, within the grounds of St James's Hospital. As Lynne had worked as a nurse at the hospital for some time, I asked if she was aware of it. She answered in the affirmative, saying "it has lilies on the surface and a path around the perimeter". Until seeing this pond indicated on the map, I was unaware of its existence. It somehow seems significant that its position is local to my 'dream portal' and Lynne's haunted house.

Lynne's haunted house in Locksway Road was very close to my own – a mere six doors down. In around 1975 – many years before she moved there – I had what I believed was a classic sleep paralysis experience.

Continued on p.68

It Happened to Me...

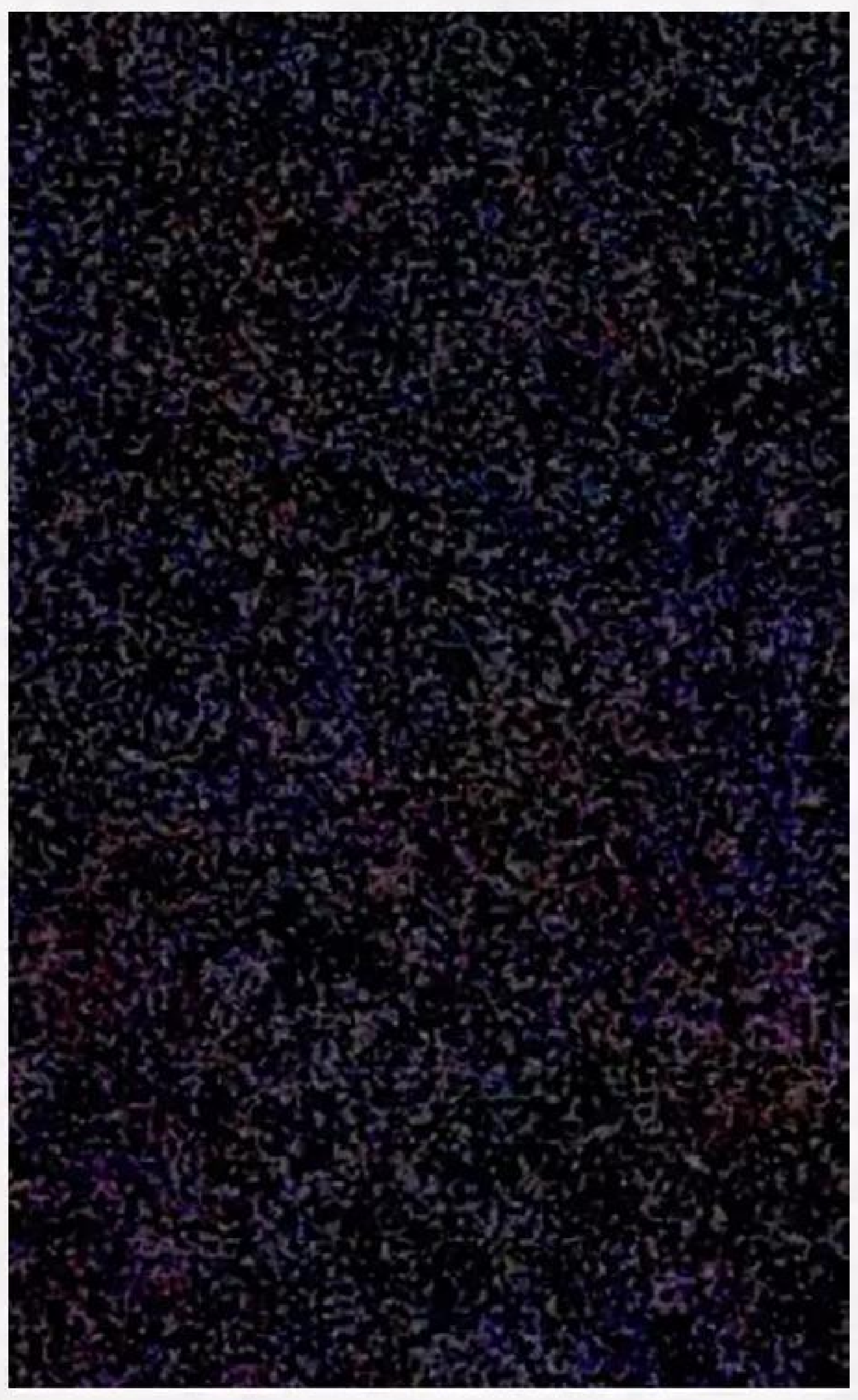
Readers write in with their own accounts of strange phenomena

Shots in the dark

My daughter works in Australia but comes home to the UK regularly. In August 2023, she happened to be staying in a hotel in Sydney for a week. It was the time of the 2023 FIFA Women's World Cup. On the evening of the 16 August she went to bed around 11pm. She remembers feeling exhausted, putting a sleep mask on and dropping off around 11.30pm. The next morning, she was "completely freaked out" to find just over 500 photographs and short video clips on her iPhone 14 Pro, none of which she'd taken herself. From display timings, they started being taken at midnight and only stopped at 6.45am, about 20 minutes before she woke up. She was alone, hadn't been drinking, and is most adamant that she did not get out of bed that night; not to the bathroom, or even leaning over for the phone after she had set its alarm. She has no history of sleepwalking.

What was most unnerving is that the shots had been taken from at least three different angles: from the side of the bed looking downwards at a charger on the carpet; at a corner of the window frame and curtain where the light gets in; and a close-up of the textured bedhead. There are dozens of short videos. They last for between two and seven seconds. All are uniformly blank, but they all play a tiny, irregular, staccato sound. (If you put such a phone on its video setting, turn it over – lens on a desk – then prod the phone, you get a very similar audio effect.)

Returning to the hotel in early evening, she requested a change of room. The staff said they were struggling to find any spare, particularly with the football being in town, but they were obviously curious as to why she wanted to move. They did upgrade her and, in fairness, did pretty much all they could to find out what had gone on; scrolling through the CCTV in the hallway, examining the room itself, interviewing the night staff, etc. That night, installed in the new room, no extraneous shots or videos appeared on the phone.



> "All the videos are uniformly blank but all play a tiny, irregular staccato sound"

It seems smartphones capture infrared pics of their owners and WhatsApp images appear out of context. But the phone here seems to have been articulated in at least three different angled positions while our daughter was asleep. (There are also a number of streamed light blotches on some otherwise black still shots.) The phone was checked to see if it had been hacked but that proved negative. There'll be some technical explanation; we just haven't found one yet.

Christopher Neil Lancaster
Manchester

Tent dream

- My brother moved to digs in Nottingham to study art. He was 18 when we spoke on the phone and he told of how he'd woken up in the night to see that the large rectangular window at the bottom of his bed had vanished – it was just a hole in the wall. Beyond the hole was a long corridor, where wounded soldiers were being attended to by nurses – a bustling scene of activity that lasted a good minute before the window and its curtains reappeared.

- Around the same time, our parents were visiting my brother in Nottingham for the weekend. I had a dream that night that my brother and I were outside our home in Newcastle, where great guide ropes were holding the house up as if it were a tent. My brother and I were pulling on the ropes, keeping the house stable. My mother phoned me next day to tell me about an amazing film they'd been to see, knowing my love of horror films – *An American Werewolf in London*. I told her of my weird dream and the phone went silent. Finally, she said something like "bloody hell" and called my brother to the phone. "Tell John about the dream you had last night," she said. He had had the exact same dream as me.

- Anyway, back to the terrible twins and my second UFO [see **FT451:64**]. I was 31 and the twins were 10. It was a Friday, around 5pm, sunshine and clear skies, travelling through Gateshead towards Newcastle. As was common, the kids, along with their younger cousin, came with me to the fishing tackle shop while I got whatever I needed for my Saturday fishing trip. They were in the back seat of the car, enjoying their McDonald's on the way home, and I was driving steadily through busy traffic. Straight ahead I saw a classic 'flying saucer'. It was silver/grey, the shape of two 'bowls' pressed together, and along the uppermost 'bowl' were three blacked-out windows. It was stationary and low, some 20ft [6m] above the rooftops, making the 'ship' itself to be around 20ft in diameter.

"Do you see that?" I practically yelled. Three young heads in the rear-view bowed forward and said things like "Yeah" and "Wow".

Seconds later, as we approached the looming rooftops and the 'saucer' disappeared from view, I had to negotiate a small roundabout, and drive around the other side of the buildings/houses before I could pull up on a verge and get out of the car. No sign of the 'saucer'. I phoned a colleague in Blaydon some five miles [8km] away and asked him to look at the sky. I told him what I'd seen, but he could see nothing. The image had been absurd, almost comical in that it was a generic B-movie flying saucer. I thought maybe I'd seen a weird-shaped hot air balloon (though a balloon would surely have still been there). Or maybe I'd seen a mirage – or a portal. Or maybe the Zarg's cloaking device had a temporary malfunction? (No one else got out of their cars to look and no sightings were reported in the local paper.) Years later, my girls have no recollection of seeing the bloody thing. Obviously they were zapped by the MIB.

John Hudspith
South Yorkshire

Floating cow

In June, my wife and I met up with our two daughters and grandchildren for a picnic in Stanmer Park, Brighton. I went with my grandson, Vincent, who is 18 (I am 66) for a walk round the park, leaving the others behind. We walked round the church at the northern end and followed the road back to where we were picnicking about half a mile away. On our left over the fence, not far from the church, were about six cows in a field. They were about 30-40 yards [27-37m] away. As we approached, one of the cows suddenly sat up on its back legs in an upright position like a person would sit. I realise how silly this sounds, but then it went into the air about two feet, and floated round the back of the other cows in this sitting pose, then landed in a normal position and started eating grass. I said to my grandson, did you see that? He said yes, the cow had just sat up and flown around. We laughed about it and joked it was a spy in a cow suit, or was caused by methane. We then just carried on the walk. We never mentioned it to anyone because what can you say without sounding stupid? Also, it probably only lasted about two or three seconds and then the scene was back to normal. By the way, no drugs were involved, not even alcohol. I have never seen anything like this before!

Graham Sayers
Worthing, West Sussex

Vanished

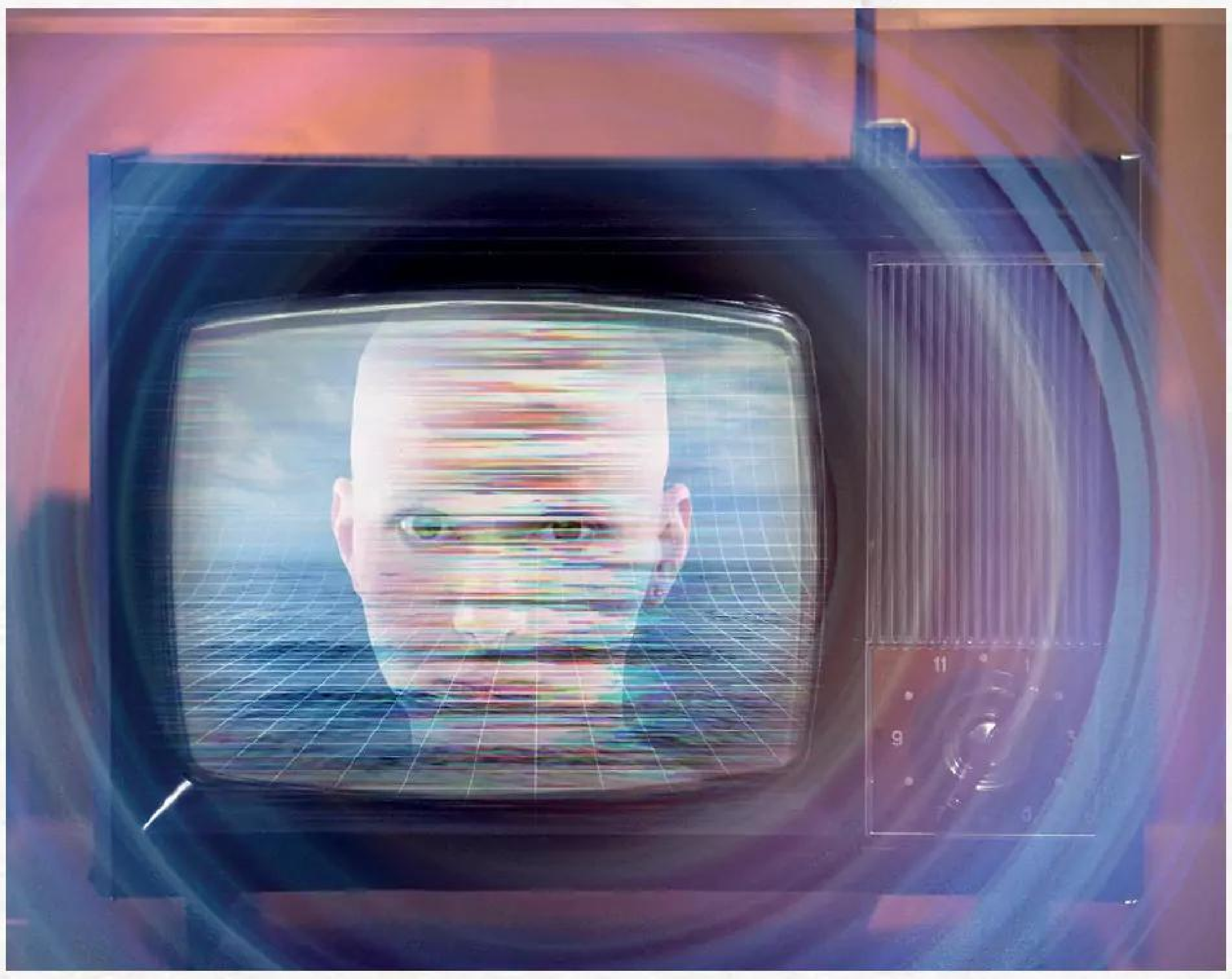
I just read Keven Whelan's letter about vanishing snacks [**FT446:62**] and have had a similar experience. When I was about 10 years old, my father worked nights in a battery plant. He would often get candy from a vending machine to stave off hunger during his shift. Sometimes, he didn't get time to eat it and would offer it to me the next day. It was one of those days and I gladly accepted an unopened box of liquorice still in the cellophane. I sat on my bed, opened the box and ate about two of them. When I went to pull out another, the rest of the contents of the box popped out of existence. They just disappeared.

At that moment, I knew two things. One, I could never tell anyone about this because they would never believe me. The second thing was that no matter what anyone tried to tell me about 'The Real World' and how everything worked, they didn't know the half of it! I began to study strange phenomena and have never lost my curiosity about the reality beneath apparent reality.

Susan Cooker
By email

Mystery broadcast

The following incident occurred in late 1988. I am not certain whether it relates a pirate broadcast or a genuine event. I was 12 years old and this episode has always stood out as beyond any flights of childhood imagination. I was watching a programme on Central Television (the West Midlands ITV network at the time) when it was interrupted by a burst of static. The voice was indistinct at first, breaking through the static and snow.



"It was a smooth voice, neutral and feminine, yet robotic in tone..."

"This has been the first attempt to broadcast through time." It was a smooth voice, neutral and feminine, yet robotic in tone, almost like today's AI voices. "*We are transmitting from * years ahead of this present.*" [* I can't recall the exact number of years.]

A genderless, hairless floating head filled the screen as a multi-coloured computer-generated landscape rolled into view below the avatar (far beyond the special effects budget of most Hollywood films at the time, let alone a pirate broadcast. The kind of CGI you didn't really start seeing until at least 2000).

"*Consider the dimension of time like an ocean or a landscape. The landscape below my/our image represents a map of time itself, we have deciphered the territory, but there are no known vessels capable of traversing the terrain of time, and it has taken great scientific collaboration and effort to transmit this signal. Commencing data dump...*"

In the corner of the screen a window of code opened up in green type on a black background transmitting faster than the eye could record. As far as I know no one recorded this broadcast, but if they had, and paused the VHS moment by moment, perhaps they would have seen mathematical formulæ; information streams encoded and digitised in the green block IBM programming language of the time – a sharp contrast to the futuristic colourful computer-generated time map ebbing and rippling beneath the uncanny valley of the AI CGI face. The green code flickered impossibly fast in the window screen in the corner.

"*It is unknown if this broadcast will be/has been successful. We have included as much as can be safely sent to your time through advanced quantum formulæ which may be deciphered through advanced computing power, these formulæ reveal the process to mapping time some foreknowledge of technologies including medical cures is also communicated.*"

Then the CGI time map disappeared and the broadcast went back to normal. Strangely the whole thing seemed to last both 30 seconds *and* about 15 minutes. Every time I think back to it my sense of how long it took to happen is almost the strangest thing about it.

I have investigated pirate broadcasts of the time, but so far haven't found anything which resembles this. Perhaps there's something in the fortean archives? I wasn't given to entering fugue states and hallucinating as a child so I can be reasonably certain this happened.

If any of your readers have heard of stories of an attempt to broadcast through time, or if anyone actually saw the broadcast themselves I would be most interested to hear about it.

James Finnegan Wakeham
By email

FT founder Bob Rickard comments:
Very interesting story, which raises some important questions. Like the discussion about the pterodactyl nailed to a barn door, I imagine there might be many more who might tell a story of 'a transmission from the future'. It is the staple of such time-travel films as *Primer* (2004) and John Carpenter's horror *Prince of Darkness* (1987). I think there are quite a few SF stories which also use this premise.

Firstly, I'm impressed at the level of detail the writer recalls nearly four decades later; and secondly being 12 years old at the time. I have to wonder about the level of detail the listener is attributing to his younger self; especially, the comments about computer software and AI graphics. His younger self would have had no way to compare them with what he had experienced until he was much older, and by then his younger memories might well have become more malleable.

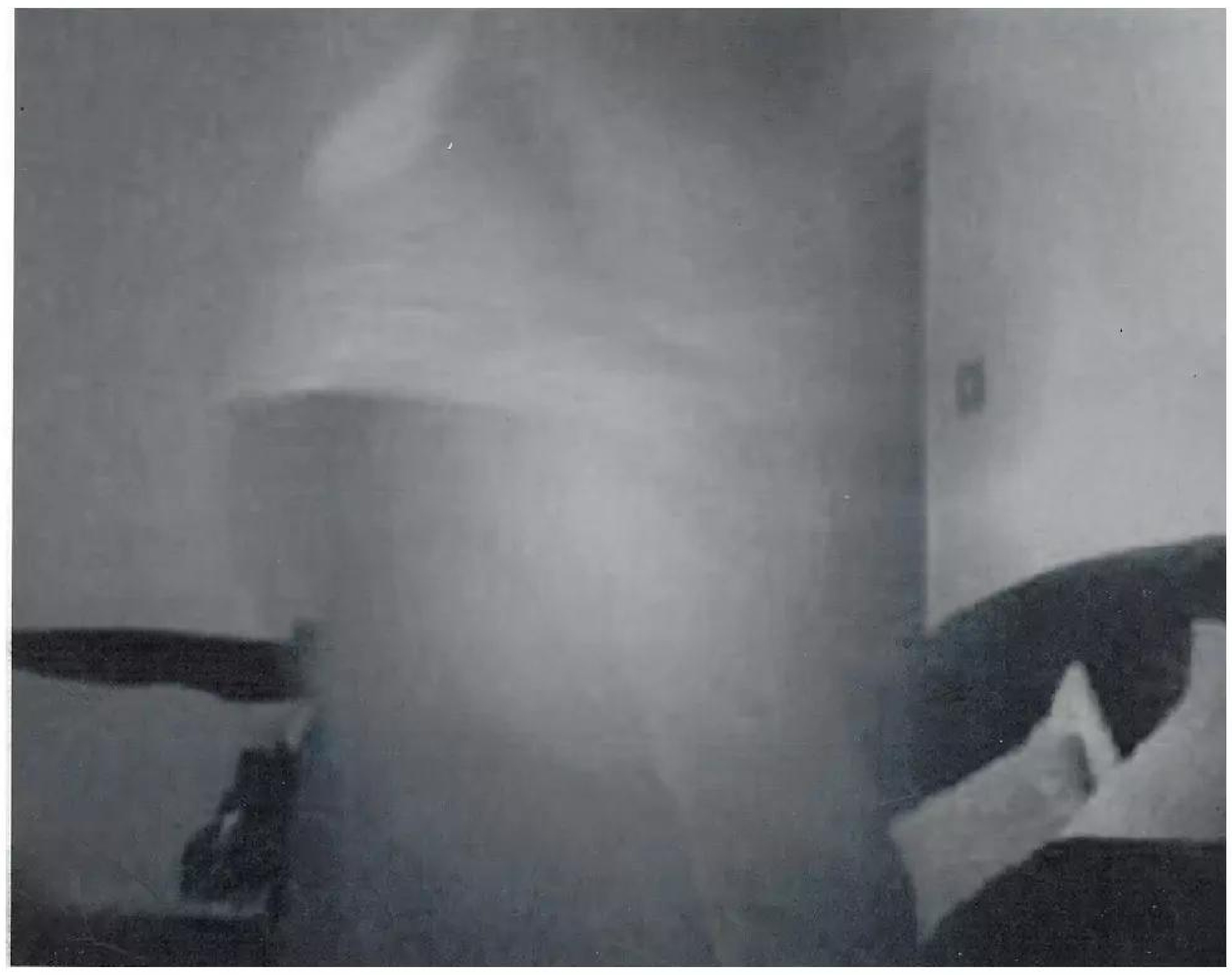
Secondly, there are odd elements within the 'transmission' itself. The voice seems to address the 'listener', referring to "your time" and "years ahead of this present" (presumably the listener's present). Yet it initially declares that this is their "first attempt to broadcast through time". How could they determine the listener in his own time?

I am not aware of any serious study of 'messages through time' (which sounds like a pretty interesting project in itself). In the meantime, without such a database to check, the likelihood of it being a particularly rich confabulated memory of a subjective experience cannot be dismissed, especially if the listener had a youthful interest in SF and fantasy literature and films.

Given that to him, "the whole thing seemed to last both 30 seconds and about 15 minutes", this seems like a reasonable assumption in the context of what we now know about the later recollection of visionary experiences in an 'altered state of consciousness'.

Still, wouldn't it be interesting if 'transmissions through time' manifested as dreams or subjective experiences? That was the basis of Carpenter's film, and it came out the year before the writer had his experience.

LETTERS



Continued from p.65

But I wonder if there was more to it, in the light of Lynne's later ordeal just along the road. At that time, I was sleeping in the front bedroom of my home – just as Lynne was – when following a very intense dream, I woke up, unable to move, and became aware of a tall figure in black robes standing at the end of the bed. It was identical in appearance to the Sandeman Port logo. (For those unfamiliar with this image, it took the form of a black silhouette of a figure in a long cloak, wearing a wide-brimmed hat.) In a sardonic tone, this apparition was saying repeatedly "It's a family reunion". I was of course terrified, but paralysed throughout the experience and found it impossible to scream for help. My parents were sleeping in the back bedroom, but I was unable to alert them to my plight. After some minutes I was able to move, and the frightening figure had vanished. Was this more than a classic case of sleep paralysis? Certainly, in Lynne's experience, she had no feeling of being paralysed on waking – other than in fear as she put it – during the third visit of the monk-like figure.

In 2017, Lynne's sister Carol sadly passed away, and her husband, Bill Doe – residing in Carisbrooke Road, leading to Priory Crescent – reported a strong presence in the house, culminating soon after, with him one night experiencing moving, orb-like lights in his bedroom. These eventually vanished, with Bill understandably interpreting them as Carol's soul leaving.

In 2021 Bill spent six months staying with his son and his family in New Zealand. On his return, he was checking the internal security camera in the living room of his home, when he was shocked to discover the image of a monk recorded on the device (shown above). He almost deleted the picture, but changed his mind. The obvious explanation, of course, would be a break-in, with a hoodie-wearing burglar caught by surprise. However, Bill was certain there was no sign of a break-in, and nothing in the house had been disturbed.

Based in the City Library, the Portsmouth Local History Society were very helpful with my enquires about a priory existing at one time in the vicinity, having discovered an 1870 map of Milton showing a building called Milton Priory situated at the top of what is now Carisbrooke Road, where it joins Priory Crescent. Unfortunately, I was unable to ascertain whether this was previously a religious house. It was, however, a large building, occupied at that time by a local worthy named Major FW Festing RMA. He was famous enough in his day to have two streets and a pub named after him in nearby Southsea. It is likely, if nor proven, that Bill Doe's home in Carisbrooke Road is sited very close to this supposed priory, which seems to have disappeared around the beginning of the 20th century, when the area became urbanised.

Nick Maloret
Milton, Hampshire

Abject nonsense

I feel I must write to express dissatisfaction with the recent item on star forts [**FT446:8-9**]. This states: "Writing for *Atlas Obscura*, Colin Dickey highlights the similarity of the star forts conspiracy to older ancient alien conspiracies. These put forward the implicitly racist suggestion that extinct non-Western civilisations could not have constructed their impressive monuments and instead needed interventions either by aliens or by Atlanteans of Western origin."

Now, while Mr Dickey has every right to make such a claim, I see no reason why it should be parroted by FT. I have followed *Ancient Aliens* and similar series for years. I have derived great enjoyment from them, despite the sometimes creaking levels of fantasy and conjecture. It is always entertaining, and I have never considered any of the theories put forward in it to be racist, implicitly or otherwise. Indeed, it's hardly as if "non-Western" monuments are singled out for questioning. Stonehenge, for example, has long been subject to legitimate inquiry as to how the great Sarsen stones were transported and lifted into position.

So, when FT feels it necessary to write that "it is interesting to see Western culture being subjected to the same mystification and denial of agency that has previously been applied to other cultures," I say: What abject nonsense! It has always been applied.

Rob Howe
By email

Intangible feline

Arthur Burton's letter [**FT449:67**] gave me a jolt. In the early 2000s in my current home I woke up during the night and was facing the clock radio on the bedside drawers. Sitting next to the clock, clearly visible in the glow from the display, was a tabby cat, facing me and looking at me. I assumed it was our tabby boy Benni. Then I sat up with my feet on the floor and turned my head. The cat had turned its head and was watching me, I reached across to stroke it and was really flabbergasted when my hand hit the top of the drawers. It actually stung a bit because it was so unexpected. I don't think it was some sort of dream because I had moved around. I went looking around the house and our Benni was sound asleep on the couch.

● Not long before I received the last issue of FT I saw what I can only think of as an apparition one evening. I was carrying two cups of coffee out of the kitchen and glanced into the unlit front room through an archway. There was a figure standing in the middle of the room with arms by its sides and its head tilted to the right as if watching me. It seemed monocoloured with dark eye sockets. I continued quickly into the family room and hurriedly put down the coffee because I was getting shaky. I told my sister I had seen something scary. I've seen heaps of scary movies and love reading Stephen King and never reacted like I did on this occasion. I felt all fluttery inside and wanted to hunch up and didn't want to recall it and over the next few days felt the same way if I thought about it. Even typing this I am fighting the urge to hunch up my shoulders and become smaller. It's a weird feeling and I don't like it. The next couple of nights we did re-enactments, but could find nothing it might have been.

Elizabeth Tanger
Melbourne, Australia

"I think what you meant to say dear, is that there's a massive Pheasant in ther front garden"

PETER A KING

READER INFO

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WHY FORTEAN?

FORTEAN TIMES is a monthly magazine of news, reviews and research on strange phenomena and experiences, curiosities, prodigies and portents. It was founded by Bob Rickard in 1973 to continue the work of Charles Fort (1874–1932).

Born of Dutch stock in Albany, New York, Fort spent many years researching scientific literature in the New York Public Library and the British Museum Library. He marshalled his evidence and set forth his philosophy in *The Book of the Damned* (1919), *New Lands* (1923), *Lo!* (1931), and *Wild Talents* (1932).

He was sceptical of dogmatic scientific explanations, observing that some scientists tended to argue according to their personal beliefs rather than the rules of evidence and that inconvenient data were ignored, suppressed, discredited or explained away. He criticised modern science for its reductionism, its attempts to define, divide and separate. Fort's dictum "One measures a circle beginning anywhere" expresses instead his philosophy of Continuity in which everything is in an intermediate and transient state between extremes.

He had ideas of the Universe-as-organism and the transient nature of all apparent phenomena, coined the term 'teleportation', and was perhaps the first to speculate that mysterious lights seen in the sky might be craft from outer space. However, he cut at the very roots of credulity: "I conceive of nothing, in religion, science or philosophy, that is more than the proper thing to wear, for a while."

Fort was by no means the first person to collect anomalies and oddities – such collections have abounded from Greece to China since ancient times. **Fortean Times** keeps alive this ancient task of dispassionate weird-watching, exploring the wild frontiers between the known and the unknown.

Besides being a journal of record, **FT** is also a forum for the discussion of observations and ideas, however absurd or unpopular, and maintains a position of benevolent scepticism towards both the orthodox and unorthodox. **FT** toes no party line.

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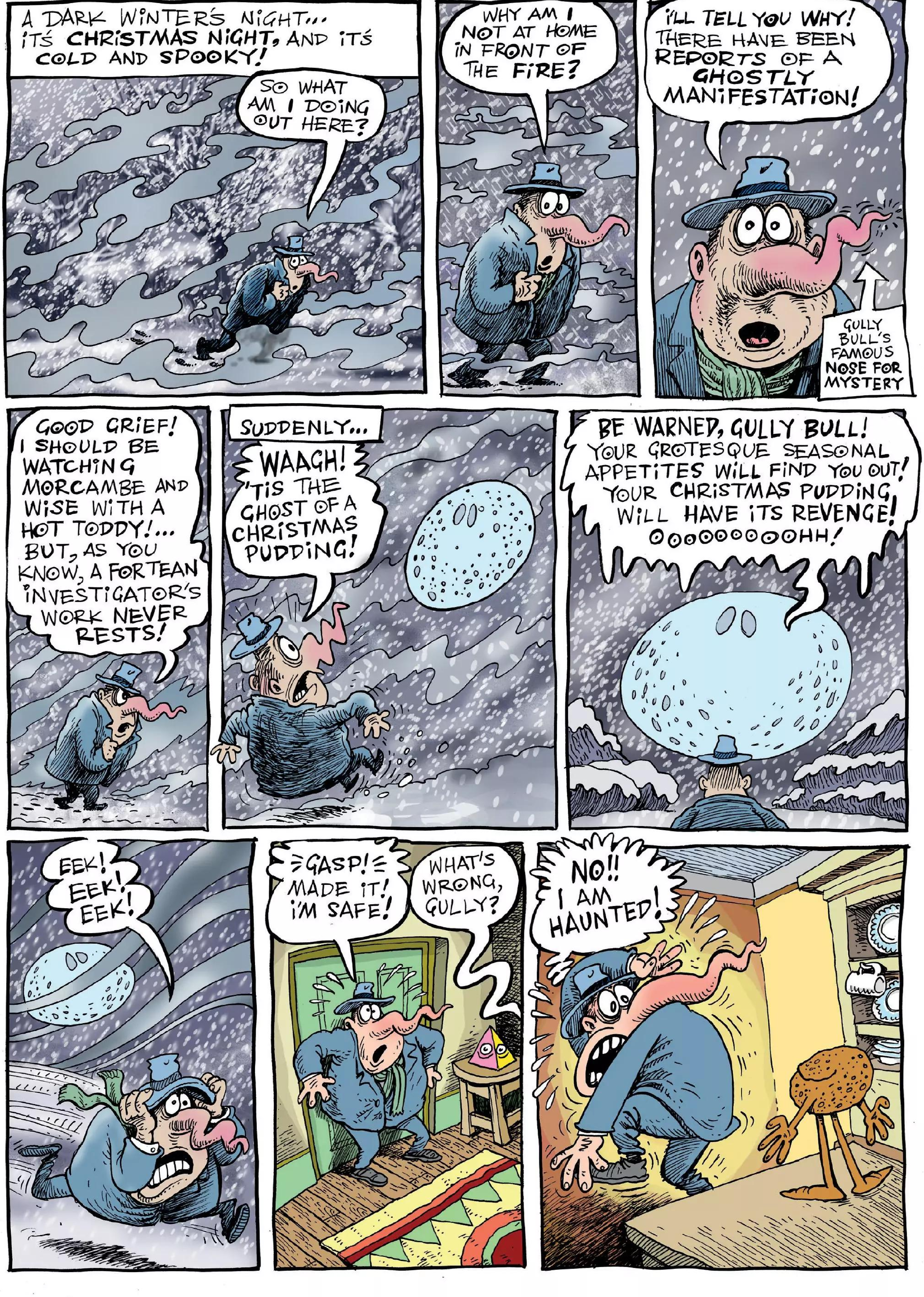
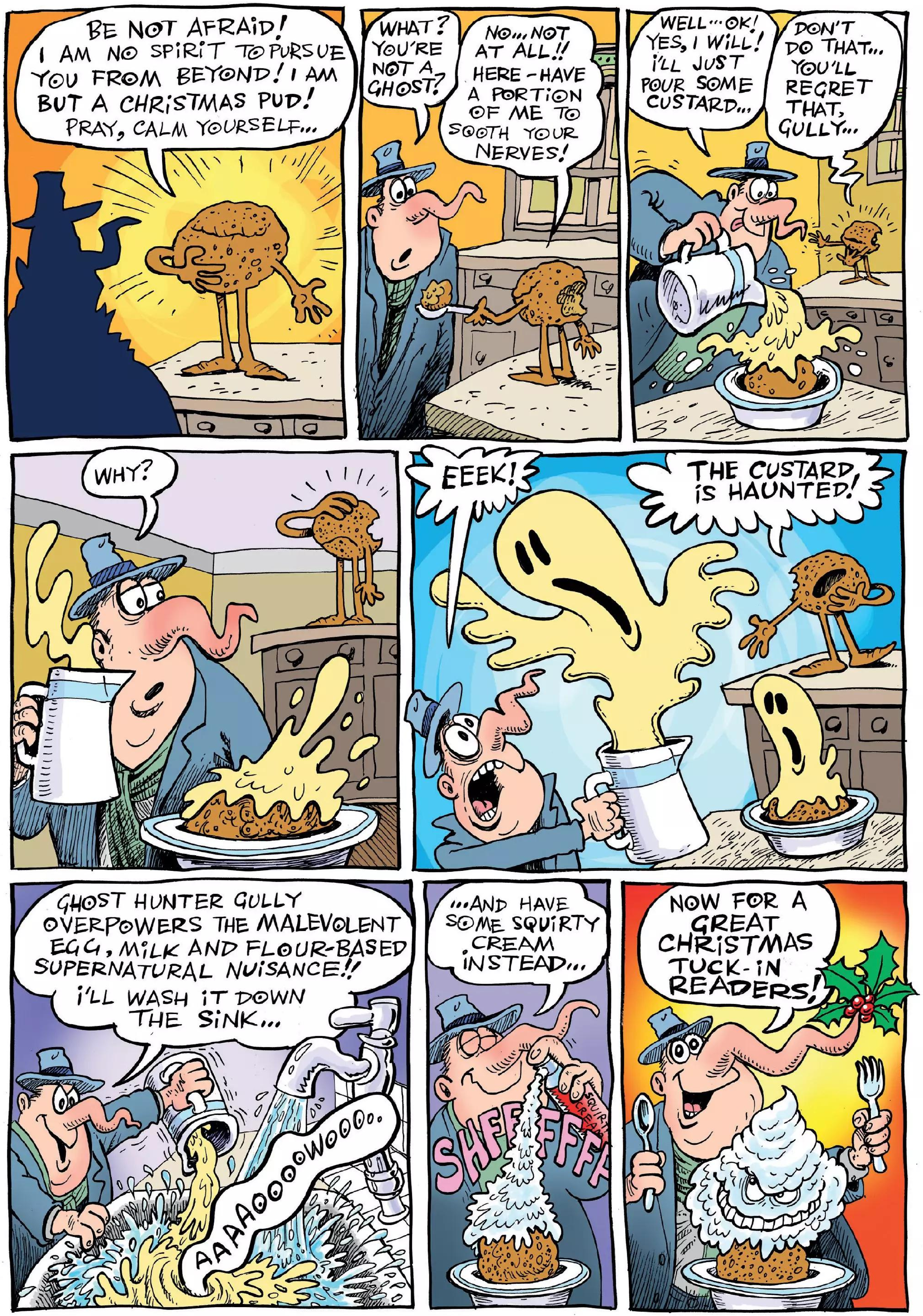
PHENOMENOMIX

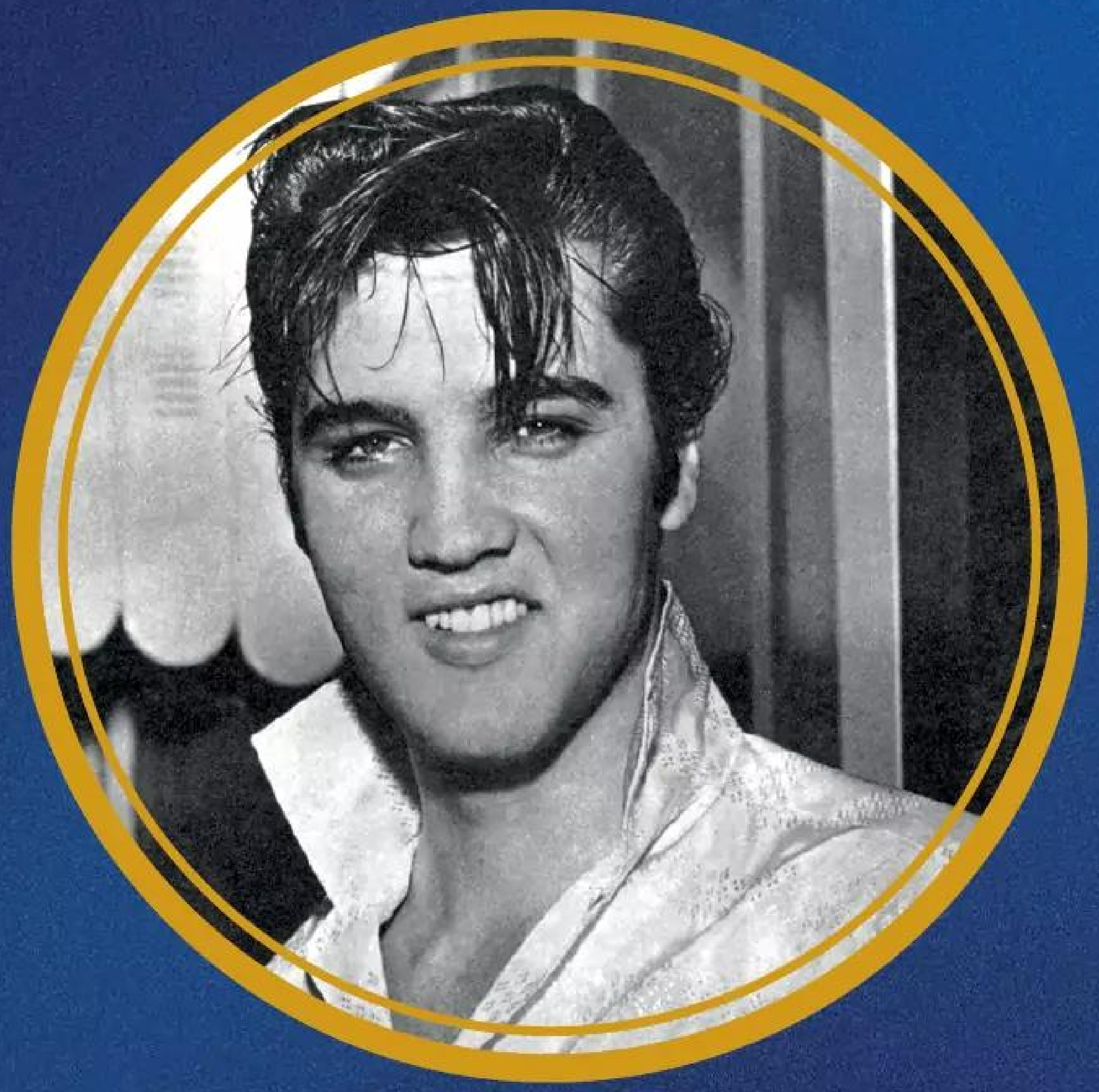
GHOST PUDDING

HUNT EMERSON


A DARK WINTER'S NIGHT... IT'S **CHRISTMAS NIGHT**, AND IT'S **COLD** AND **SPOOKY**!
SO WHAT AM **I** DOING OUT HERE?
WHY AM **I** NOT AT HOME IN FRONT OF THE **FIRE**?
I'LL **TELL YOU WHY**! THERE HAVE BEEN **REPORTS** OF A **GHOSTLY** MANIFESTATION!
GULLY BULL'S FAMOUS **NOSE FOR MYSTERY**
GOOD GRIEF! I SHOULD BE WATCHING MORCAMBE AND WISE WITH A HOT TODDY!... BUT, AS YOU KNOW, A FORTEAN INVESTIGATOR'S WORK **NEVER RESTS**!
SUDDENLY...
WAAGH! 'TIS THE GHOST OF A CHRISTMAS PUDDING!
BE WARNED, GULLY BULL! YOUR GROTESQUE SEASONAL APPETITES WILL FIND YOU OUT! YOUR **CHRISTMAS PUDDING** WILL **HAVE ITS REVENGE**! OOOOOOOOOOHH!
EEK! EEK! EEK!
GASP! MADE IT! I'M SAFE!
WHAT'S WRONG, GULLY?
NO!! I AM HAUNTED!


BE NOT AFRAID! I AM NO SPIRIT TO PURSUE YOU FROM BEYOND! I AM BUT A CHRISTMAS PUD! PRAY, CALM YOURSELF...
WHAT? YOU'RE NOT A GHOST?
NO... NOT AT ALL!! HERE - HAVE A PORTION OF ME TO SOOTH YOUR NERVES!
WELL... OK! YES, I WILL! I'LL JUST POUR SOME CUSTARD...
DON'T DO THAT... YOU'LL REGRET THAT, GULLY...
WHY?
EEEK!
THE CUSTARD IS HAUNTED!
GHOST HUNTER GULLY OVERPOWERS THE MALEVOLENT EGG, MILK AND FLOUR-BASED SUPERNATURAL NUISANCE!! I'LL WASH IT DOWN THE SINK...
AAAAOOOOWOOOO...
...AND HAVE SOME SQUIRTY CREAM INSTEAD...
SHFFFFFF
SQUIRTY CREAM
NOW FOR A GREAT CHRISTMAS TUCK-IN READERS!

COMING NEXT MONTH



ELVIS: KING OF THE STRANGE

ROCK 'N' ROLL FORTEANA

TURN OUT THE LIGHTS

ARTHUR LOWE'S LOST X-FILES

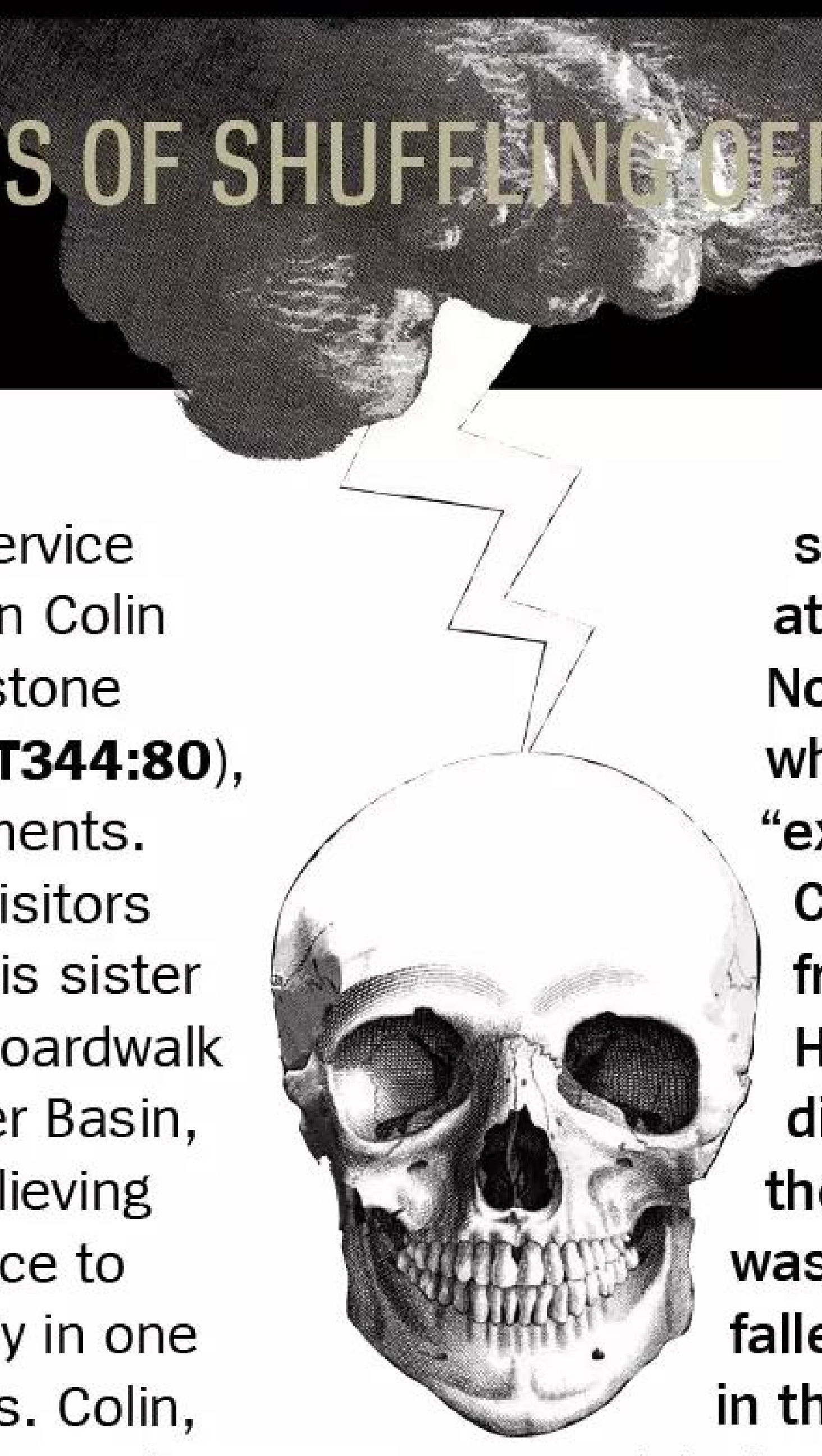
+

EARLY MEN IN BLACK,
HAUNTED COMPUTERS,
THE HEXHAM HEADS,
AND MUCH MORE...

FORTEAN TIMES 453
ON SALE 31 DEC 2024

STRANGE DEATHS

UNUSUAL WAYS OF SHUFFLING OFF THIS MORTAL COIL



The US National Park Service has released a report on Colin Scott's death in Yellowstone Park on 7 June 2016 (**FT344:80**), describing his final moments. Despite signs warning visitors not to, Scott, 23, and his sister Sable stepped off the boardwalk beside the Norris Geyser Basin, with park authorities believing they were seeking a place to "hot pot" – swim illegally in one of the park's hot springs. Colin, though, slipped and fell into the geyser pool and "did not get out". Sable was recording their walk on her phone and captured both the moment that Colin fell in and her unsuccessful attempts to rescue him, but as there was no phone signal in the area she could not call for help and had to run to a nearby museum to alert park authorities. By the time she returned with park officials, Colin was only visible from the chest up, although his hands were also above the water. Park ranger Phil Strehle reported that Colin's T-shirt was visible and "what appeared to be a cross... resting on the subject's face" but that "due to the report of the individual not previously visible, a lack of movement, suspected extreme temperatures, and indications of several thermal burns, the subject was determined to be deceased". Because of extreme conditions in the geyser pool and the "volatile nature" of the feature, park rangers decided it would not be possible to retrieve Colin's body and when they returned the next day his corpse could not be seen. The report states that the "consensus among the rescue/recovery team... was that the extreme heat of the hot spring, coupled with its acidic nature, dissolved the remains." *unilad.com, 23 Jul 2024.*

Following treatment at Sandwell General Hospital in West Bromwich, West Midlands, a 36-year-old man, not named in reports, retired to the café in the hospital's reception area at around midday. He remained there for several hours but was not seen to move after about 1.30pm. All the while hospital staff and patients used the tables around him and café employees even cleared and cleaned his table. However, at around 4.45pm a security guard noted that the man was slumped over the table and tried to rouse him, getting no response. Medics were called and tried to resuscitate the man but found rigor mortis had already set in, suggesting he had been dead for some hours. Meanwhile, staff at Kettering General Hospital in Northamptonshire were baffled when they could find no trace of "extremely vulnerable" patient Craig Smith after he absconded from his ward during treatment. His body was eventually discovered in an oven in one of the hospital's kitchens after a hole was spotted in the roof. Smith had fallen through the roof and landed in the oven, where he died of his injuries. *birminghammail.co.uk, 1 Sept; cateringinsight.com, 19 Sept 2024.*

Chris Reeves, 52, routinely commuted on a bike to his job as a Network Rail signaller in Rugby, Warwickshire. On 30 July, he was just five minutes away from his destination when two cats fighting in the street cut across his path. "He must have startled them as he came round the corner and they ran out in front of him," said Reeves's son Dominic. "One of them went under the front tyre and unfortunately the other went under the back tyre." As a result, Reeve was thrown from his bike and, as he was not wearing a helmet, suffered a serious brain injury. He was airlifted to Walsgrave Hospital, Coventry, in a coma, but died a week later without regaining consciousness. *independent.co.uk, 15 Aug 2024.*

Suspecting an early Hallowe'en prank, locals called police to Butcher Park in Warren, a suburb of Detroit, Michigan, after spotting an open coffin with a dead woman in it. A photo posted on Facebook showed the open casket with a bouquet of flowers beside it resting under large leafy trees in the park, accompanied by a man sitting at a nearby picnic table. Investigation revealed that the coffin contained the remains of 97-year-old Madonna Stiller, who had lived locally, but had recently died in Wellsville, New York. It seems that the family wished to honour her before her funeral, but it had proved impossible to arrange a viewing in a local funeral home. Instead, "The funeral director temporarily situated the casket in the park so that the deceased's family members could say their final goodbyes prior to her burial at Mt. Olivet Cemetery," police reported. Stiller's son, Ken Stiller, said, "We didn't mean to cause any problems and didn't mean for it to be in the newspaper," while park officials stated that "a park can't automatically be a place for open caskets". *canoe.com, 6 Sept 2024.*

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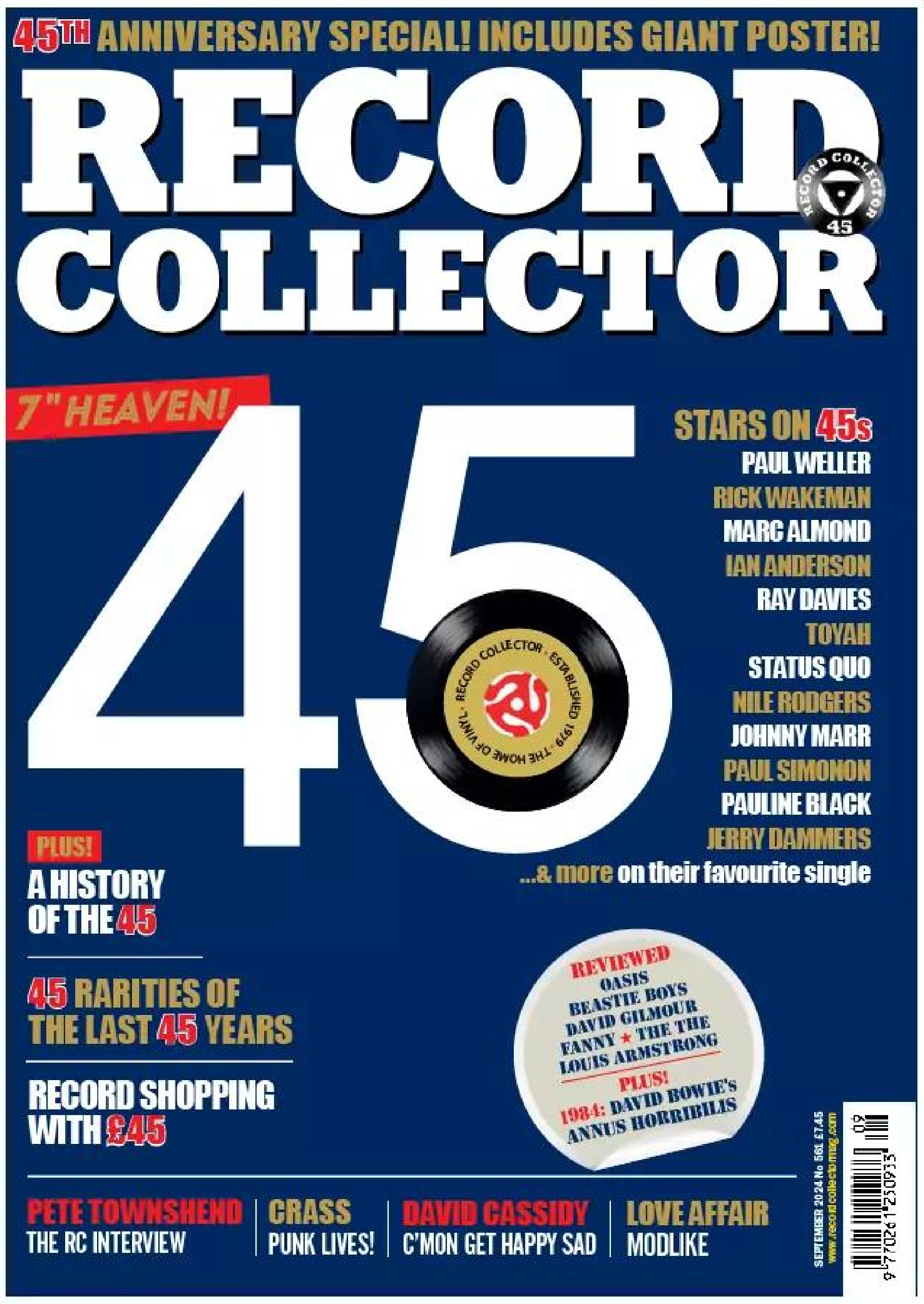
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